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Mythic Space in the Western World.
A study of spatial representation in French novels of the fin(s) de siècle.

by

Audrey O'Brien ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

French language, literatures and linguistics.

Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2000

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Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

Year this Degree Granted: 2000

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Abstract

The focus of this thesis is a comparison of spatial representation in a selection of francophone novels of the late nineteenth and late twentieth centuries with particular emphasis on the representation of spaces considered to have such special significance in Western culture that they can be called "mythic spaces." In general these are spaces which are considered to stand in oppostion to the social space of lived experience. Although the novels of both periods share a sense of fin de siècle pessimism, the thesis shows how the representation of these spaces, the island, the desert, America, Jerusalem and the natural world, is influenced by the sense of time and space current in the particular era in which the novels were written. The late nineteenth century novels of Jules Verne and Pierre Loti express a sense of shrinking space which is the result of the age of Imperialism. Those written in the late twentieth-century, including novels by Michel Tournier, Jacques Poulin, J.M.G Le Clézio and Yves Berger, are influenced by the globalization of society and the hegemony of Western culture. Whereas the novels of the nineteenth century concentrate on geographically locatable space, those of the twentieth portray the same places as spaces of the imagination created by language. The thesis speculates on the implications regarding the status of myth in Western culture suggested by this transition from the representation of space as geographical to the recognition of space as textual area.

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Mythic Space in the Western World. A study of spatial representation in French novels of the fin(s) de siècle* submitted by Audrey O'Brien in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in French language, literatures and linguistics.

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DEDICATION

For James

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following people: co-supervisors Dr Don Bruce and Dr Paul Dubé for their guidance, and encouragement throughout this project, Dr Lynn Penrod for the many helpful suggestions and corrections, Dr Anthony Purdy for providing part of the initial inspiration for the project, and Dr Robert Wilcocks for his thoughtful appraisal of it.
I wish also to thank my family and friends, Renate Peters, Anna Street, and Marianne Krajicek whose kindness and encouragement were of great assistance in the completion of this project.

CONTENTS

Page.

Introduction 1

Chapter 1. Island Utopias and Dystopias. 18

Chapter 2. The Desert and the Quest for the Holy Land. 71

Chapter 3. Metamorphoses of the American Dream. 129

Chapter 4. The Natural Paradise. 180

Conclusion. 207

Bibliography 210

Introduction.

The main focus of this study is the representation in contemporary francophone literature of "mythic spaces", that is to say those spaces which in western imagination are imbued with such historical, cultural and spiritual significance that each of them, the island, the desert, Jerusalem, America, the garden, might be said to constitute the object of a discourse in itself. However, in order to establish a point of reference, a way of seeing how these representations are typical of our era and how they compare to those of other times, the representation of these same spaces in novels of the late nineteenth century will also be examined.[1] Since these "mythic spaces" have been represented in western literature for many centuries, it might be argued that the choice of two such distinct eras is quite arbitrary and that therefore no valid comparison may be reasonably drawn between them. There does exist, however, a relationship between the two periods which makes such comparison both interesting and worthwhile. As the twentieth century ends and a new millenium begins, it seems natural to reflect upon the ending of the previous century when the term "fin de siècle" came into being. Eugen Weber points to the many similarities between nineteenth century "fin de siècle" French society and our own era, noting that the two periods have in common a sense of social malaise amidst growing prosperity resulting in a "discrepancy between material progress and spiritual dejection.... so much was going right even in France, as the nineteenth century ended; so much

[1] The novels I have chosen as representative of the preoccupation with mythic space are: *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* by Pierre Loti, *L'île mysterieuse*, *L'île à hélice* , *Les cinq cents millions de la Bégum* and *Le testament d'un excentrique* by Jules Verne; *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* by Michel Tournier, *Désert* and *L'étoile errante* by J.M.G Le Clézio, *Le fou d'Amérique*, *Les matins du nouveau monde*, *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* and *Le monde après la pluie* by Yves Berger and *Les Grandes Marées* and *Volkswagen Blues* by Jacques Poulin. All these authors, whether European or North American, participate in the cultural mythology of the West and all can be seen as "myth seekers."

was being said to make one think that all was going wrong." [2] Weber mentions the apprehension felt in the late nineteenth century about "pollution, crowding, noise, nerves and drugs; threats to the environment, to peace, to security....., the noxious effects of press, publicity and advertising, the decline of public and private standards" (5-6) all of which, allowing for changes in terminology, are present day preoccupations. Concerns about decadence and degeneration are common to both eras.

The two eras can be compared not only from the perspective of fin de siècle thinking, but from that of modernity versus postmodernity as well. For most social critics and historians, a reflection on postmodernity cannot occur without establishing its relationship to modernity. Accordingly we shall refer, throughout the chapters which follow, to works by David Harvey, Krishan Kumar, Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard in an attempt to establish the connotations of the terms modernity and postmodernity, even though an exact definition remains elusive. Yet despite the lack of a precise definition, it is possible to see in the novels which will be the object of this study how spatial representation in literature is related to other cultural and social phenomena of the two eras in question. This study will examine how the representation of particular spaces is linked to the thinking of an era.[3] Is postmodernity, as Dick Hebdige would have it, " modernity without the hopes and dreams which made modernity bearable"?[4]

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2 Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de siècle* (Harvard UP, 1986) 2.

3 This expression is problematic in the case of postmodernism. Fredric Jameson sees postmodern theory as "the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age", or zeitgeist or "system" or "current situation" any longer."
Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) xi.

4 D.Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 195.

The works under consideration here have been chosen because of the particular spatial representations contained in them. The selection of novels by Pierre Loti, Jules Verne, Michel Tournier, J.M.G Le Clézio, Yves Berger and Jacques Poulin, which we shall examine in detail, all portray spaces which are significant in western cultural mythology. The existence of these mythic spaces in the novels of the late nineteenth century, an era of materialism and faith in scientific progress, and those of our own time, an era seemingly preoccupied with technological and economic concerns, indicate that myth continues to play a role in materialistic cultures. For Fredric Jameson one of the characteristics of the postmodern era is in fact its sense of loss, its nostalgia for myth: "What is mourned for is the memory of deep memory; what is enacted is a nostalgia for nostalgia, for grand, older, extinct questions of origin and telos."[5] Could it be that myth disappeared from our culture as the role of religion and of the "grand narratives" declined in importance? Does its continued representation reflect that nostalgia of which Jameson speaks? Or does myth persist only in fragmented form, in artifacts (dream catchers and the like) sold in thousands to tourists or in various books and guides to New Age spirituality? Is myth along with the rest of contemporary life trapped in the realm of the virtual? These are questions considered by many writers of the late twentieth century.

Before continuing, it is important to establish first of all just what we mean by the vague term "myth." Etymologically myth is a story. In the many cultures of the world there are myths (or stories) which explain natural phenomena. Thus myth is traditionally associated with nature. Ancient myths relate man's origin, his place in the world and his relationship to the

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5 Jameson 156.

rest of creation.[6] As humans have progressively distanced themselves from the natural world, one would expect to find, in what is called the post-industrial or postmodern society, that the importance of myth has diminished: "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." [7] Nature is not, of course, "gone for good", rather our perception of what constitutes "nature" has changed. Certainly the desire for some kind of relationship with it persists and finds expression in art and literature.

Myth is not confined exclusively to the realm of nature. There exist urban myths as well and, as Roland Barthes has shown, French bourgeois society has its own collection of myths. For Barthes, "le mythe est une parole." [8] This means that anything which can be talked about is subject to mythification, the process by which a concept is perceived as "natural" rather than historical and therefore no longer open to question. For Barthes myth (in its French bourgeois manifestation) is a negative, anti-revolutionary force: "Car la fin même des mythes, c'est d'immobiliser le monde." [9] Although the desire to immobilize the world is expressed in many of the novels we shall examine in this study, for the authors in question myth is a liberating force rather than a negative one. The mythic spaces represent oppositional spaces and, as such, are indicative of a desire to transcend, or at least to enrich, the materialistic living conditions of (post)modernity.

The traditional sacred places of western culture (such as islands,

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6 A widely accepted definition of myth is that given by Mircea Eliade: "Le mythe raconte une histoire sacrée; il relate un évènement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des commencements." Pierre Brunel, dir., *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires* (Editions du Rocher, 1988) 8

7 Jameson ix.

8 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) 193.

9 Barthes 243.

deserts, gardens and holy cities) continue to be represented in contemporary writing. What I wish to examine here is the evolution of the representation of these mythic spaces in order to see to what extent the representation of space reflects the ideology of an era, to what extent it expresses the sense of being at a particular time and place. If, as David Harvey states, our sense of living in a postmodern era is linked to the way in which we perceive time and space, [10] it seems logical to assume that the representation of these categories in literature should tell us something about the way humans relate to the world they inhabit.

There is clearly a strong link between the spaces in question and the notion of utopia, which, as Krishan Kumar points out, is a Western cultural phenomenon: "Although ideas such as Golden Age, Paradise, the Land of Cockaygne and the Millennium are to be found in many cultures, only in the West do we find utopia and a utopian tradition. Utopia, in short, has temporal and spatial as well as conceptual boundaries." [11] Utopias (like mythic spaces) are by nature static, since they represent an ideal which cannot be improved upon. However the concept of utopia is far from static. Northrop Frye in his essay, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", shows how the concept of utopia changes according to social conditions at different periods in history. Frye notes that "The great classical utopias derived their form from city states, exactly locatable in space," whereas in our age of globalization utopias "are thought of as world states , taking up all the available space." He

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10 "While simultaneity in the shifting dimensions of time and space is no proof of necessary or causal connection, strong a priori grounds can be adduced for the proposition that there is some kind of necessary relation between the rise of postmodernist cultural forms, the emergence of more flexible modes of capital accumulation, and a new round of 'time-space compression' in the organization of capitalism." David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) vii.

11 Krishan Kumar, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 1991) 33.

adds "New utopias would have to derive their form from the shifting and dissolving movement of society."[12]

What Frye says of utopia is also applicable to the "mythic spaces" with which this study concerns itself. It was thought for many centuries, for instance, that the Garden of Eden, was "exactly locatable in space."[13] There has not always been such a firm distinction drawn between "mythic" and "real" space as in our own era. As more and more territories were drawn into the web of colonizing nations, less space was available to excite the imagination of explorers and writers. By the late nineteenth century the consolidation of colonial territories by great European powers had brought about a sense of globalization, of shrinking space. The age of exploration was apparently over and the whole world had been discovered, mapped and made available for exploitation. Stephen Kern discusses the perception of homogenization in time and space which occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century. The introduction of standard time was one significant factor in the homogenizing process.[14] Another was the completion of the colonizing movement by Western powers:

> Western historians began to ponder the concept of "empty space" as their nations discovered that none was left. In America the census of 1890 declared that the frontier was closed, and by the end of the century the dominant world powers had finished taking the vast "open" spaces of Africa and Asia.[15]

The loss of new frontiers in the real world did not diminish the desire to

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12 Northrop Frye, "Varieties of Literary Utopias", *The Stubborn Structure* (London: Methuen, 1970) 133-4.

13 Indeed Columbus believed he had located Paradise in the New World. "Pour Colomb lui-même dans ses écrits, le Nouveau Monde est la Jérusalem céleste ou le Paradis terrestre enfin reconquis." *Dictionnaire des mythes* 409.

14 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) 11.

15 Kern 164.

experience the new and unknown. Exoticist writings are, as Chris Bongie demonstrates, a reaction against the homogenization of the world which was the result of modernization. [16] What is expressed in the later writings of Verne and Loti is the impossibility of fulfilling the exoticist desire for an "elsewhere":

> The initial optimism of the exoticist project gives way, in the last decades of the century, to a pessimistic vision in which the exotic comes to seem less a space of possibility than one of impossibility. This critical transformation of the exotic imaginary, which we begin to see at work in writers like Verne and Loti, is coterminous with the phase of acute geopolitical expansion initiated by the European nation-states during the last decades of the nineteenth century and commonly referred to as the New Imperialism. [17]

In spite of the doubts cast upon the existence of an exotic "elsewhere" somewhere in the world, the novels of Verne and Loti still give a sense of "real" space, that is to say that Loti's desert and Verne's islands and ideal communities are, like the great classical utopias, "exactly locatable in space." They exist within the modern industrialized world but form an enclave of oppositional space, functioning much like the various American utopian communities which formed in the nineteenth century, such as New Harmony , Brook Farm or the socialist community of Kaweah in California.[18] In the novels it is this oppositional quality which gives value to mythic space and time, for mythic time exists beyond history and mythic

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16 Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories. Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford UP, 1991).

17 Bongie 17 - 18.

18 There is a vast amount of writing on the subject of utopia. Since the topic is too extensive to be dealt with here I have referred to a small selection of works on utopia for the purpose of this study.Two books by Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and anti-utopia in modern times* and *Utopianism* present a detailed study of utopian thinking. Ivan Doig's *Utopian America: Dreams and Realities* provides an interesting account of a variety of American utopian communities.

space provides a haven from the vicissitudes of everyday life. Like their real life counterparts these nineteenth century literary utopias prove to be unsustainable: Verne's mysterious island sinks beneath the waves and Loti's quest for Jerusalem will be an immense disillusionment.

It seems possible to see in all these novels the desire for utopia or for a mythic state of harmony which coexists with the notion of its impossibility. The modern scientific, industrial world is very present in the novels of Verne, as the colonized world is in Loti's novels. The spatial representations in their works suggest a desire for evasion. The notion of desire would seem to be what most strongly links mythic space and utopia. Ruth Levitas in *The Concept of Utopia* points out that "Utopia is the expression of the desire for a better way of being," adding that although the definition of utopia according to form, function and content changes over time, "whatever we think of particular utopias, we learn a lot about the experience of living under any set of conditions by reflecting upon the desires which those conditions generate and yet leave unfulfilled. For that is the space which utopia occupies." [19]

These late nineteenth-century novels are influenced by the ideologies of the era in which they were written. Colonialism, belief in scientific progress and exoticism are the currents which help form the spatial representations. Verne's island in *L'île mystérieuse* is a utopian community built by the scientific achievements of its inhabitants, destroyed by the powers of nature and reconstructed in Iowa. *L'île à hélice* is a technological utopia which founders because human moral development lags behind its scientific knowledge. Loti's *Désert* and *Jérusalem*, in spite of portraying a spiritual quest, resemble in many ways the earlier exotic novels in which fin de siècle

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[19] Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1990) 8.

ennui drives the author/narrator to seek out faraway places and new experiences in a modern world which is devoid of interest. Thus we see the late nineteenth-century preoccupation with scientific progress, colonization, and reaction against these, shaping the literary representation of spaces which have for centuries held an important place in Western imagination.

Similarly the latter decades of the twentieth century have given a different form to these spaces, reflecting a different set of preoccupations. Frye mentions the "shifting and dissolving movement of society that is gradually replacing the fixed locations of life". David Harvey characterizes our own era as one in which we have become an individualistic society of transients with a nostalgia for common values.[20] Transience is certainly a condition of our existence. We live increasingly in an age of impermanence, of nomadism. The twentieth century has seen a vast increase in the number of refugees due to large scale human conflict. In Western, post-industrial society, movement has become commonplace as there has been a shift to temporary work. This transience finds expression in many novels of our era (including those to be studied here) in which characters tend not to be rooted in a society or a community but wander the globe. It would seem that the notion of quest, a feature of earlier novels and of myth itself has been replaced by perpetual motion.

We are not merely transient, according to Harvey, but individualistic as well. Along with the rise of humanism and capitalism, a sense of individualism has accompanied the destiny of modern man ever since the Renaissance. This phenomenon has reached extreme proportions in the twentieth century. This is reflected in the novel. Krishan Kumar attributes

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[20] Harvey 288.

the decline in twentieth century literary utopias to a change in the novel:

> The great panoramic social novel of the nineteenth century, the "realist" novel of Balzac, Dickens and Tolstoy which aimed to encompass the whole of society within its covers is no more. The novel has retreated to private worlds. Like contemporary science fiction, it is more interested in the "inner space" of the mind and in the emotions than in the outer world of society and politics. Psychology or even psychoanalysis, not sociology, is the master passion. [21]

The fact that we live in a "psychological" age has transformed the way we relate to the myths of Western culture. By "psychological" I refer to our extreme preoccupation with the individual.[22] The mythic spaces are, in the novels of Tournier, Le Clézio, Berger and Poulin chosen for this study, just as much spaces of the mind as of the outside world. Characters seek not a utopian community or ideal space in the world itself (and if they do, disillusionment always results) but rather a mental harmony, a sense of meaning and a reconciliation between their own consciousness and the world they inhabit. The characters in all these novels are solitary, suffering from alienation to the extent that they sometimes doubt their own existence. They are also, in relation to the space they inhabit, evanescent. Whereas, in the novels of Verne and Loti characters have a firm sense of their own being and order their space by their gaze, in the twentieth century novels the characters have little substance, particularly Le Clézio's desert nomads, who often appear as shimmering apparitions. This has doubtless much to do with the fact that life in our times is permeated with the flickering images of cinema and television. Identity has been replaced by a preoccupation with image as the media assume an important role in social life. We have seen also great

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21 Kumar, *Utopia and anti-utopia* 421-422.

22 The sense of isolation which accompanies extreme individualism is one of the themes of Jean Baudrillard's *L'illusion de la fin* (Paris: Galilée, 1992).

changes in the perception of human identity as the very notion of a fixed identity has been challenged, with the result that humans are not only less sure of their place in the world, but have come to doubt their very existence, just as they have come to believe in the impossibility of representing the real world in a literary text. [23] The greatest challenge of all to our sense of identity and place in the world comes surely from the rapid increase in the use of computer technology, which has created a new (virtual) space and new form of Imperialism. "Mère perdue sur le World Wide Web", a chapter heading in Régine Robin's *L'immense fatigue des pierres*[24] expresses the danger which lurks in cyberspace: here identity has no meaning, for identities or personalities can be formed, modified or totally changed at will in a world devoid of corporeal existence.

Another major change in our era has taken place in the relationship between humans and the natural world. No longer is it a question of man dominating nature or even of carving out for himself a small space in the natural world, but rather a question of human beings making a desperate attempt to salvage what little nature is left. This sense that nature has been swept away from beneath our feet accentuates the notions of impermanence and transience which find expression in the novel. Baudrillard states that our preoccupation with ecology is born of the fact that there is no nature left. We

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[23] The problematic of language can be seen as a continuation of the crisis of representation which came about in the mid nineteenth-century as a result of political,economic and social changes. David Harvey stresses the relationship between the internationalism of money power resulting in the unification of European space, political upheaval and cultural representations: "All of these shifts created a crisis of representation. Neither literature nor art could avoid the question of internationalism, synchrony, insecure temporality, and the tension within the dominant measure of value between the financial system and its monetary or commodity base." Harvey makes reference to Barthes' affirmation that "classical writing disintegrated, and the whole of literature, from Flaubert to the present day, became the problematics of language." *The Condition of Postmodernity* 262-263.

[24] Régine Robin, *L'immense fatigue des pierres* (Montréal: XYZ, 1996).

enact legislation, whether it be to protect human rights or those of the natural world, only when these have vanished from existence.[25]

We need to return now to the notion of myth which is the focus of this study. What role does myth, and more specifically "mythic space", hold in the latter decades of the twentieth century? If the island, the desert, Jerusalem, America, the garden, the promised land continue to be represented in the literature of our era, it must be because they still hold a special place in our imagination. I will argue that these spaces still function as spaces of opposition as they did in the nineteenth century, but that their role has altered in that they now represent a way of recuperating what we feel has been lost from the world, mainly a sense of harmony with nature, a sense of the meaning of life (which it was always the purpose of myth to explain), a sense of our own identity. We accept the fact that there is no return to the garden, no real space left in which to create a utopian community (particularly since the demise of the master narratives of socialism and communism), but our desire for these spaces remains. Mythic space can still be created in the imagination and as text where it exists as an "elsewhere" apart from the world of rampant consumerism in which human beings exist as image. The novels of Berger, Le Clézio, Tournier and Poulin echo the preoccupations of the critics of consumer society such as Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. We see an evolution in thought from the novels of the 1960s and 1970s, which are influenced by the critique of consumer society and the rapidly increasing move from the "société du spectacle", to the world of virtual reality or the hyperreal, in which, as Baudrillard tells us, a centrifugal force casts us further and further adrift from reality, from meaning. [26] Myth

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25 These notions are explored in *L'illusion de la fin*.

26 Baudrillard, *L'illusion* 12.

may be the last straw at which to grasp.

The notion of recuperation, of salvaging fragments, occurs in most of the novels in question here. Mythic space occurs in fragmentary form and the search for it is more a mental process than a physical quest. What these late twentieth-century novels express is that post-industrial, consumer society is inescapable since the process of globalization is now complete. It is no longer possible to enter a mythic space or time existing outside of this society, but it is possible, through imagination and writing, to enrich the soulless world of high technology with a dose of spirituality. This attempt at remythification can be seen as a late twentieth-century manifestation of exoticism. In several of the novels we shall examine, this remythification is brought about by the rehabilitation of colonized people and places. [27] Tournier's Vendredi (*Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*), Le Clézio's Lalla (*Désert*) and the numerous Amerindians who appear in the novels of Yves Berger in spite of, or maybe because of their marginalization from the Western world, have the power to bring to it a sense of the mystery of the natural world and a sense of a time and space existing outside history and modern life. The reforging of links to the natural world and access to mythic time and space is also a means of achieving a sense of personal identity.

As we look at the literary representations of five mythic spaces, we shall see how they have become internalised over the course of a century and how they echo the preoccupations of the society and time in which they were written. The main focus will be on spatial representation, but other themes closely linked to this will also be explored: time, the quest for identity and language itself.

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[27] Since the novelists in question, with the exception of Jacques Poulin, are European (and all are white males!) one might see this as yet another form of Western appropriation.

In the first chapter, which deals with the mythic space of the island, we shall consider four novels - two by Jules Verne, *L'île mystérieuse* and *L'île à hélice,* one by Michel Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and one by Jacques Poulin, *Les grandes marées. L'île mystérieuse* portrays an island utopia created by human mastery over nature, and *L'île à hélice* presents a scientific utopia which is destroyed by the failings of human nature. Both these islands are represented as defined spaces, geographically locatable. The island in Michel Tournier's *Vendredi* seems far less "real" and is at first representative of human isolation and later, after the whole capitalist world which Robinson has set up there is (literally) exploded, the island space becomes inextricably intertwined with Robinson's sense of being. Although the island in Jacques Poulin's *Grandes Marées* is a real space, linked to the modern world, it also functions far more as a symbolic space of consciousness, where the main character struggles to find a definitive translation of words and of his life.

Chapter Two deals with the desert and the quest for Jerusalem. I have placed these two spaces together because they are linked in the works of Loti, since *Le désert* and *Jérusalem* form the first two volumes in the trilogy describing Loti's spiritual quest. The same spaces provide the framework of Le Clézio's *Désert* and *L'étoile errante.* Loti, the traveller, is seeking out the last remnants of spirituality in a secular, demythified world. The reader of these "récits de voyage" is left with an impression of landscapes frozen in time and space. [28] Le Clézio's writing, on the other hand, strives to bring to life spaces

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[28] Chris Bongie sees this writing technique of Loti's as a response to the failure of the exoticist project: "What begins to emerge ....as a compensation for the impossibility of disengaging the subject of exoticism from its colonial mire is what we might call a "travelogic" approach to the world - a fixation upon the merely picturesque and incidental that neglects, without contesting, its own attachment to the (hi)story of colonialism." (104).

which have lost their spiritual significance in the postmodern world. They are portrayed less as real space than as facets of human consciousness and as language. Whereas the city of Jerusalem itself has been defeated by modernity, the evocation of Jerusalem still has the power to lend hope to human beings in the most desperate of situations.

The theme of Chapter Three is the representation of America as the promised land. America has long been considered the promised land in a physical sense, at least since Columbus proclaimed he had located Eden there. In the European imagination, America has for centuries offered the promise of a new beginning, a wide open space where society might start afresh, having rid itself of old world corruption. It has often been seen as the future of Europe. The European attitude towards America has long been a mixture of admiration (for America's democratic institutions especially[29]) and hostility towards its materialism, philistinism and its tendency towards global domination. In two novels of Yves Berger, *Le Fou d'Amérique* and *Les matins du nouveau monde*, the myth of America is resurrected as the author attempts to rewrite history in the hope of averting the destruction of the Amerindian cultures and his own inevitable demise by stopping the course of time itself. This hopeless quest is similar in some ways to that of the protagonists in Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* who pursue fragments of the American dream in a trip across the continent which is really a quest for a sense of identity, a quest which can never be fulfilled. In all of the twentieth-century novels we shall study, mythic space and personal fulfilment are inextricably intertwined.

With the failure of America (as demonstrated most forcefully in the

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[29] As we see in the writings of Tocqueville and Bourget.

novels of Berger) as mythic space, the only recourse for the seekers of the promised land is a return to nature. Thus in chapter Four we shall see how traditional reverence for the garden as lost paradise in Western literature becomes transformed from an earthly paradise shaped by modern man in the nineteenth century into a desire for reintegration with nature in our own era which is marked by the ecology movement. With globalization complete, what is left of the natural world has become the equivalent of the garden. We might say that the garden has increased in physical size as nature is perceived to have diminished. For this reason we attempt to enclose and protect nature (for the benefit of future generations) in national parks and then, paradoxically, destroy it by excess tourism. The later novels of Yves Berger, *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve*and *Le monde après la pluie* are largely concerned with the salvaging of remnants of the natural world in order to save the human from total disintegration, as well as with a personal quest for salvation. As in the novels concerning America, Berger's nature novels reveal the same obsession with the passage of time.

In conclusion it is important to consider the notion of the time and space of postmodernity. We shall examine how the notions expressed by social critics such as Jean Baudrillard concerning the hyperreal, the eternal present of postmodernity and the end of history relate to the representation of time and space in the novels in question. There are certainly parallels to be drawn between the expression of time/space in the novels and Baudrillard's idea of a late twentieth-century society which has stepped out of history and is moving ceaselessly in space, a society trapped in an eternal present which, because it cannot contemplate a future, entertains itself by recreating

moments of the past.[30] There is indeed a sense in the novels we will study of postmodernity being "modernity without the hopes and dreams which made modernity bearable."

[30] See Baudrillard's *L'illusion de la fin*.

Chapter 1.

Island Utopias and Dystopias.

The topos of the island in Western literature can be seen as part of a long cultural heritage, an archetypal symbol present in the mythologies which have most influenced Western culture. As such, it can have positive or negative connotations. Northrop Frye sees the island as a neutral archetype whose significance changes according to context.[1] In both Greek and Celtic mythology the island is associated with paradise, realm of the blessed or home of the gods, and this aspect has lived on in Western cultural tradition with the result that the notion of the island as spiritual centre or refuge has become almost a commonplace in our literature and our thought: "La recherche de l'île déserte ou de l'île inconnue ou de l'île riche en surprises est un des thèmes fondamentaux de la littérature, des rêves, des désirs." [2] In the Christian tradition as well, the island is a place of special significance. Throughout the ages groups of people have chosen islands as places of spiritual retreat. Religious communities such as that on Holy Island off the Northumberland coast were able to flourish for centuries undisturbed thanks to the seclusion of island life. With the growing secularisation of Western society, the island continued to hold its place in the imagination as a space of retreat from everyday existence. The image of the island paradise devoid of spiritual connotations continues to exist in contemporary culture as travel agents throughout the Western world advertise exotic island vacations as a

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1 "It is of course only the general comic or tragic context that determines the interpretation of any symbol: this is obvious with relatively neutral archetypes like the island , which may be Prospero's island or Circe's." Northrop Frye, " The Archetypes of Literature." In *Myth and Literature* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1966) 97.

2 *Dictionnaire des symboles* 419.

means of escape from work and worry.

The island, however, in both reality and imagination, is an ambivalent space having both positive and negative qualities. It can be paradise, but also prison. It can be a place of retreat where one is free from hostility, but also a place where one is trapped with nowhere to flee when an enemy or natural disaster strikes. Thus the island becomes a place of tension. This tension forms the base of island novels such as Golding's *Lord of the Flies* or J.G Ballard's *Rushing to Paradise,* novels in which a potential paradise degenerates into a realm of chaos and violence. In this respect the island resembles the ship in that it is a microcosm, a small self-sufficient world which has the possibility of becoming a utopia, but which is also never free from the possibility of disaster. It would seem that islanders and mariners experience the fragility of human existence more acutely than their continental counterparts. Stories of island experiences would seem to have much in common, following a narrative pattern which corresponds to a form of initiation rite for the protagonist. According to Michael Seidel:

> [....] any island story, whether Homer's, Shakespeare's or Defoe's, builds on a narrative pattern of separation, displacement, and resubstantiation so important to Western literature. The appeal of island stories has always to do with the reserves of individual resourcefulness under the most difficult circumstances. (37)

The space of the island is linked in Western imagination to the narratives which have the quality of myth. [3]

The space of the island has also established itself in language as a symbol of the human condition as illustrated in the cliché "no man is an

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[3] In his excellent study of Crusoe figures Jean-Paul Engélibert discusses the symbolism of the island and its association with the myth of creation: "L'île déserte, territoire vierge, équivaut symboliquement à l'Eden: la solitude insulaire autorise des scénarios de recréation des origines." *La postérité de Robinson Crusoé. Un mythe littéraire de la modernité* (Genève: Droz, 1997) 28-29.

island." [4] Pascal also used the image of the desert island to express the sense of existential anguish and human solitude brought about by man's discovery of his place in the vastness of the universe.[5] The topos of the desert island is akin to the individual mind and undergoes the same tensions. Retreat into oneself brings the possibility of peace but one is always threatened both from without and within.

The publication of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 was the beginning of a literary myth[6] which added a further dimension to the topos of the desert island, that of the survival of the shipwrecked sailor, who in his dreadful solitude toils to recreate the civilisation from which he has been separated. In Western culture the figure of Robinson Crusoe (epitome of modern man) came to symbolise the triumph of the human spirit (or more accurately that of Western "civilised" man) over solitude and over wild nature. Since the appearance of the first Robinson the character has continued to haunt Western literature in many different guises: there are female Robinsons, also children, solitary Robinsons and groups of the same.[7] As Michel Tournier very aptly expresses it, " Bien de tous les hommes, Robinson est l'un des éléments constitutifs de l'âme de l'homme occidental."[8] Tournier

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4 These words were originally spoken by John Donne in a sermon. Donne. *Meditation* XVII

5 "En voyant l'aveuglement et la misère de l'homme, en regardant tout l'univers muet et l'homme sans lumière abandonné à lui-même, et comme égaré dans ce recoin de l'univers sans savoir qui l'y a mis, ce qu'il y est venu faire, ce qu'il deviendra en mourant, incapable de toute connaissance, j'entre en effroi comme un homme qu'on aurait porté endormi dans une île déserte et effroyable, et qui s'éveillerait sans connaître et sans moyen d'en sortir." Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Larousse, 1987)198

6 "Le mythe littéraire ... est un récit fermement structuré, symboliquement surdéterminé, d'inspiration métaphysique (voire sacrée) reprenant le syntagme de base d'un ou plusieurs textes fondateurs." Engélibert 13.

7 There are many well known examples in European literature such as Wyss's *Swiss Family Robinson* (1812), Giraudoux's *Suzanne et le Pacifique* (1921), Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and Coetzee's *Foe* (1986).

8 Michel Tournier, *Le vent paraclet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 221.

suggests that in Western culture we have interiorised the Robinson Crusoe figure, seeing in his solitary struggle to survive by imposing order on the chaos of nature an analogy with the life of modern man. The mythic status of the character is confirmed by the fact that Robinson is far better known than his author. Indeed it sometimes seems forgotten that he is a fictional character. Many studies have been done on the figure of Robinson Crusoe in Western culture, which would tend to confirm the importance of this character in our imagination. Ian Watt stresses the importance of Defoe's Crusoe as the first representation of homo economicus in English literature. [9] In a more recent study, *Robinson et Robinsonnades*, Marie-Hélène Cabrol-Weber begins by asking the question:

> Pourquoi le thème de Robinson et de la robinsonnade plaît-il encore alors qu'on se rapproche du troisième millénaire? ....Cette fascination est-elle due à un rêve inaccessible où chaque individu projette sa conception d'une vie et d'une société idéales ou à un cauchemar angoissant où l'homme reconnaît la solitude qui l'habite face à ses semblables et face au mystère du monde?[10]

Cabrol-Weber sees a parallel between the experiences of Defoe's Crusoe and the rites of passage as described in other fictional texts and anthropological accounts. She notes that "Robinson renaît et cette renaissance lui permet de se transformer." [11] The transformation of the central character is an important narrative feature in later adaptations of the Crusoe myth. It is possible to see a relationship between the direction which this transformation takes and the time period in which the Crusoe story was written. Jean-Paul Engélibert demonstrates convincingly the influence of culture and ideology on the

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[9] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987)

[10] Marie-Hélène Cabrol-Weber, *Robinson et Robinsonnade* (Toulouse: EUS, 1993) 7.

[11] Cabrol-Weber 21.

representation of the Crusoe figure:

> Si Robinson Crusoé manifestait la foi de l'âge classique et des Lumières en le sujet de la pensée, les robinsonnades de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle signent la perte de confiance en un je dont l'identité devient sujette au doute, dont la permanence n'est plus évidente, dont l'unité même est problématique. [12]

It would seem that different generations of writers have used the Robinson Crusoe character to explore what it means to be human in a certain time and place: the various Robinsons reflect the preoccupations of the era and society in which they were created or call into question the values of that society. This is evident in the novels which we shall examine in this chapter. The island in Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* (1874) is transformed, by the industriousness of the five "shipwrecked" men and the application of scientific principles, into a space resembling a nineteenth century American utopic community. Verne's later novel, *L'île à hélice* (1895), written at a time when the author had begun to doubt the value of unlimited scientific progress, expresses the dangers inherent in the creation of a technologically advanced island utopia. In Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967), which reflects the anti-materialist, anti-capitalist sentiments of European and North American protest movements of the 1960s, Crusoe's capitalist society is subverted by the actions of Vendredi and becomes a natural paradise. The protagonist of Jacques Poulin's *Les Grandes Marées* is very much a postmodern Crusoe trying, unsuccessfully, to find meaning and happiness in consumer society.

In *Robinson et Robinsonnades,* the author explores the variations in representation of the Robinson character (from the eighteenth to the

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12 Engélibert 239.

twentieth century) by examining the different treatment of time, space, relationship to nature, activities undertaken and the place of religion. These categories (with the exception of the last) also provide a useful framework for the focus of this study, particularly those of time and space. We shall examine the form which the island and its inhabitants assume in the different periods in question in order to see how it is that the mythic space of the island can function as both an oppositional space to the society which the protagonists have left and yet at the same time be a re-creation of that same society. We shall explore also possible reasons for the continuing existence of this topos in both European and North American fiction up to the present time. [13] How does the mythic space of the island function in these novels? How has our relationship to myths evolved, as collective consciousness and sense of place in the hierarchy have been eroded by increasing emphasis on the individual? If we assume, as Ian Watt affirms, that the novel as such came into being when the ordinary individual became worthy of attention, we assume also a relationship between sense of being and a particular form of representation. The solid, recognisable individual of the realist novel has given way to the evanescent, problematic postmodern subject. But novels continue to deal with the ways in which this subject relates to the world implying a particular perception of time and place. Points of reference, one of which is myth, are not abolished, but perceived in a different light. What Paul Socken suggests of Quebec literature applies equally to that of much contemporary European

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13 Jean-Paul Engélibert discusses the persistance of the Crusoe myth in Western culture: "Que devient la robinsonnade quand les conditions sociales, historiques, idéologiques de son émergence et de son épanouissement ont disparu? Il semble que les réécritures de Robinson Crusoé, depuis William Golding, manifestent l'impossibilité de poursuivre le mythe de Robinson et en même temps celle de le dépasser. Il semble qu'elles reconnaissent l'impossibilité de perpétuer un mythe littéraire dont le sens aurait disparu de notre horizon de pensée, mais que parallèlement elles signalent l'impossibilité de s'en défaire." 21

writing which has personalised and interiorised former mythic models:

> L'homme moderne existe au niveau intérieur et non cosmique: les mythes doivent donc s'adresser à lui d'une façon nouvelle et personnelle. C'est non seulement la nature et la forme de la quête qui ont changé mais aussi le résultat. Toute solution, toute réponse ne seront que provisoires, hésitantes et individuelles. [14]

It is equally possible that if myths exist at all in contemporary society they do so only as clichés, emptied of their former significance, just as human existence is increasingly turned in on itself and away from the natural environment which myths originally sought to interpret. Jean Baudrillard sees consumer society as being a myth unto itself. " Si la société de consommation ne produit plus de mythe, c'est qu'elle est à elle-même son propre mythe." [15] The denunciation of consumerism, then, becomes part of that myth. [16] The question arises as to why traditional mythic forms continue to exist in the cultural production of a society which would seem to have made a break with its original myths. If, as Mircea Eliade affirms: " Le mythe raconte une histoire sacrée: il relate un événement qui a eu lieu dans le temps primordial, le temps fabuleux des commencements"[17], how is it that on the one hand we refuse, in general, to accept the old myths (the sacred) as part of our lives as we presume pre-modern peoples to have done, and yet continue to incorporate these myths into art, literature and entertainment? Is it because of some power intrinsic to the myths themselves or because they have become a part of our language games? How has our relationship to

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[14] Paul Socken, "Le mythe au Québec à l'époque moderne" in *Mythes dans la littérature d'expression française*. Metka Zupancic (ed).(Les Editions du Nordir, 1994) 56.

[15] Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation* (Paris: Denoël, 1970) 311.

[16] Ibid. 316.

[17] Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 102.

myth changed? A possible answer lies in a quotation embedded in the text of Poulin's *Le Vieux Chagrin*. The narrator is reading from a commentary by Paul Hazard on *The Thousand and One Nights* in which the author describes the influence of that book on western taste:

> alors les sultanes, les visirs, les derviches, les médecins grecs, les esclaves noirs, remplacèrent la fée Carabosse et la fée Aurore [.....] alors une mode succéda à une autre: mais ce qui ne changea pas, ce fut l'exigence humaine, qui veut des contes après des contes, des rêves après des rêves, éternellement. [18]

Perhaps our survival, like that of Scheherazade, depends on our ability to keep on telling stories whether they be in the form of oral folk tales or spectacular Disney versions. But what is specifically postmodern in the telling of tales and myths in contemporary literature is the constant reminder that they are just tales. Writing focuses on the process of telling rather than on what is being told.

The Robinson Crusoe story has been told and retold many times since Defoe created the character in the early eighteenth century. [19] Crusoe, alone on his island, has achieved the status of mythic figure in Western literature. This figure, however, is not static. In the novels which we shall examine, the representation of the character and his relationship to the island space he inhabits are very much a reflection of the sense of time and space prevalent at the time of writing of the novel. If we accept David Harvey's premise that changes in cultural practices are linked to the way in which we experience time and space, the study of the representation of these two aspects in the novels in question here provides a useful analytical framework for

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18 Jacques Poulin, *Le vieux chagrin* (Montréal: Leméac, 1989) 66.

19 To be more precise, of the many adventures of Robinson Crusoe which form the content of Defoe's novel, only the island episode has been the subject of numerous rewritings.

interpreting the evolution of both the island topos and the Robinson Crusoe myth. As Bakhtin has shown in his development of the notion of the chronotope, time and space are intrinsically linked. Actions are formed in a specific context and all contexts are shaped by the kind of time and space that operate within them. [20] The context of Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* is that of an era of faith in scientific progress, but it is possible to see other currents at work.

L'île mystérieuse.

In this rewriting of the Crusoe story, five men in a balloon, escaping from captivity during the American Civil War, find themselves cast onto an uninhabited island. Thus, like the original Robinson Crusoe, they are removed from historical time and social space to a place outside their normal sphere of reference. The beautiful island on which they land contains all the necessities of life (food, water, the means to build shelter) and has the potential to become a paradise. Rather than settling into a blissful island existence, Verne's five Crusoes, like their famous predecessor, set about "colonizing" the island. They recreate the whole of western civilization in an astonishingly short time, bringing the island into the linear time of modernity. However, in this novel as in Verne's other works both linear time and cyclical time are represented, the time of scientific progress and the time of myth in the form of cosmic time. As the five men progress in the creation of an ever more complex civilization, geological forces are at work which will bring about the destruction of the island in which that civilization has been constructed. Thus there is a movement from chaos to cosmos and

[20] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin. Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford UP, 1990) 367.

back to chaos.[21] The myth of eternal recurrence would seem to counterbalance the onward movement of progress. Verne weaves into his novel a sense of different scales of time: the vastness of geological time contrasts with the limited time of human progress. There are numerous references throughout the novel to cataclysmic geological processes such as the sinking of continents and the cooling of the earth. Cyrus Smith declares to his companions with the utmost assurance that, "quelle qu'en soit la cause, notre globe se refroidira un jour." (276) There is however no need to indulge in apocalyptic despair since "la prévoyante nature" is busy constructing new lands nearer the equator where migrants from the frozen northern and southern continents will find refuge. Cyrus Smith echoes the preoccupation with the second theory of thermo-dynamics and notion of entropy prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century. As J.A.V Chapple has shown, these theories made the span of human existence seem far more insignificant, as did the growing interest in paleontology.[22] However, in spite of the references to cosmic time in *L'île mystérieuse* , the human organisation of time on the island occupies a more important place.

When the five castaways initially find themselves on the island they, like other Robinson figures, use the organisation of time as a means of protecting themselves from chaos. They keep a careful calendar with the result that the time of the civilization they have left, with its working days and holidays, is faithfully preserved. The attention paid to Sundays and religious holidays, as Cabrol-Weber notes, "ressemble plus à un hommage

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21 Mircea Eliade uses these terms: "tout territoire occupé dans le but d'y habiter ou de l'utiliser comme 'espace vital' est préalablement transformé de 'chaos' en 'cosmo'; c'est-à-dire que par l'effet du rituel, il lui est conféré une 'forme', qui le fait aussi devenir réel." *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) 168.

22 Chapple 58.

supplémentaire à leurs capacités de calcul qu'à leur piété." (156) The colonists rebuild their civilization from scratch, always with an eye to the future, planning to make the island an American colony, but the line of progress is interrupted by the eruption of the volcano and ensuing annihilation of the entire island. The time of scientific progress is (apparently) obliterated by cyclical, mythic time. The utopic community of Lincoln island is, however, reconstructed in America, in the state of Iowa: "Là fut fondée une vaste colonie à laquelle ils donnèrent le nom de l'île disparue dans les profondeurs du Pacifique." (865) In this reconstruction we see the triumph of human time, that is to say, the time of scientific progress, of civilization building, over the destruction wrought by cosmic time. Just as old continents disappear and new ones form, so the island community is engulfed and then rebuilt elswhere.

The island in this novel functions as a microcosm and the island's lifespan represents not only a belief in the rise and fall and rise again of Western civilization, but also a faith in the creation of a new and better world, should the old one succomb to entropy. Cyrus Smith appears as the incarnation of this faith and optimism when he declares: "Peut-être, alors, notre sphéroïde se reposera-t-il, se refera-t-il dans la mort pour ressusciter un jour dans des conditions supérieures!" (277) Although Smith does add that such matters are God's secret, the words of the engineer would seem to carry more weight than the word of God, at least in Pencroff's estimation, for the sailor asserts that for him, Cyrus Smith's words are prophecies. Scientific discourse is foregrounded here as throughout the novel. References to God are made more as a matter of form than of belief. These Robinson Crusoe figures, unlike Defoe's Crusoe, trust to the wonders of scientific knowledge rather than to divine providence in the process of the colonization of the

space of the island which they undertake.

Space is a vital component of the various rewritings of the Robinson Crusoe story. The representation of the space of the island, like that of island time, tends to reflect certain preoccupations of the era to which the novels belong. In *L'île mystérieuse* the island would seem to exist as a space in the real world whose exact location can be pinpointed thanks to the scientific knowledge of the multi-talented Cyrus Smith. The five men stranded on the island regularly make references to their country of origin, America, and consider the possibility of claiming the island for their country. "Nous ferons de cette île une petite Amérique" declares Pencroff. (123) This desire is evident in the giving of the name "l'île Lincoln" to the island. The baptising of a remote forested region "the Far West" is further indication that the island space is seen as a micro- America. Unlike the later novel *L'île à Hélice* , in this one America (or rather the states of the Union) is seen as having a positive value, being the symbol of liberty and progress. The men, who see themselves not as castaways but as colonists, set about mapping the island and classifying the astonishing variety of species found there. It is in the description of the exploration of the island that we see the connection between mapping and appropriation:

> L'île se développait sous leurs regards comme un plan en relief avec ses teintes diverses, vertes pour les forêts, jaunes pour les sables, bleues pour les eaux. Ils la saisissaient dans tout son ensemble. (121)

The island is perceived as a map. Having appropriated it in their sight they will go on to make the maximum use of its resources: "Il n'y avait plus ...qu'à explorer le sol au triple point de vue de ses ressources minérales, végétales et animales." (122-3)

Michel Serres writes of this "appropriation par les savants" of territories already claimed by explorers. [23] Historically the work of the scientists and cartographers strengthened the hold of the West on its new lands. Although the main thrust of the European colonial movement was past by the 1870's, the work of consolidation continued. In *L'île mystérieuse* there is the expression of delight in the discovering and charting of new territories and previously unknown plants and animals, but underlying this, as we have seen, is the ever present threat of cataclysm and complete annihilation. This novel is, on the one hand, a hymn of praise to the nineteenth century bourgeois values of work and application of knowledge: "Ainsi donc tout réussissait, grâce à l'activité de ces hommes courageux et intelligents. La Providence faisaient beaucoup pour eux sans doute, mais fidèles au grand précepte ils s'aidaient d'abord et le ciel leur venait ensuite en aide." (100) On the other hand it contains a warning that the works of nature are still more powerful and sublime than those of man: "Quel spectacle que ce combat entre l'eau et le feu! Quelle plume pourrait décrire cette scène d'une merveilleuse horreur et quel pinceau la pourrait peindre?" (236) In spite of the exact pinpointing of the island's position, the characters as well as the reader question the sense of reality. When Pencroff asks Cyrus Smith "croyez-vous qu'il y ait des îles à naufragés?" (423) it is because this island seems simply too good to be true. It is the microcosm of a continent complete with everything required for the sustaining of a very comfortable lifestyle. Besides the natural bounties of the island, the colonists are supplied with a variety of equipment in a chest washed on shore. In this chest are tools, firearms, a sextant, a compass, a thermometer, an atlas, an encyclopedia of

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[23] Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit,1974) 12.

natural science and a supply of paper. Thus the colonists are equipped to confirm more accurately the position of the island, to chart and measure and to record their findings. They are now enabled to consolidate their position as a colonial power. The mysterious island, which has already been studied and interpreted by Cyrus Smith, will be even more scientifically examined thanks to the new instruments and more of its mystery will be revealed. Culture triumphs over wild nature in this island space.

In *l'Ile mystérieuse* the disposition and use of space illustrate a clear separation of nature and civilization. In this novel the figure of Ayrton, another Robinson Crusoe rescued from the island of Tabor, symbolises the return to an animal state which threatens civilized man who lives alone in a natural environment: "...un sauvage, dans toute l'horrible acceptation du mot, et d'autant plus épouvantable qu'il semblait être tombé au dernier degré de l'abrutissement." (176) The five colonists retain their status as civilized beings by dwelling in an enclosed space (Granite House) which is made to resemble as much as possible the interior of a bourgeois residence. Within that space the hierarchy of the society from which the colonists come is strictly adhered to, with Cyrus Smith at the head because of his superior intelligence and technical ability and Nab, the black servant confined largely to the area of domestic duty. [24] There is absolutely no question of their living a "primitive" life style in harmony with nature; instead the complex structures of the western world are reproduced on the island. Order is imposed on nature as much as possible and a refuge is established within

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[24] Verne's representations of former slaves or their descendants reveals the author's particular form of racism. In *L'Ile mystérieuse* Nab's devotion to his master is equalled only by that of Smith's dog, Top. In *Le testament d'un excentrique* the black servant Tommy wants his employer to buy him rather than employ him, so that he cannot be dismissed and will be able to serve his master for the rest of his life! It is as if, in Verne's imagination, the notion of emancipation for non-whites is unthinkable, as it would disrupt the social harmony.

which the five colonists are protected from their environment. In many ways the spatial representation of *l'Ile mystérieuse* recalls that of Defoe's novel. As Michael Seidel points out:

> If island space is in many ways the map of Crusoe's mind there are two sorts of spatial metaphors in the narrative that translate into psychological states. One is expansive and aggrandizing - Crusoe opening up the island, increasing his store and storage, exploring new territory. The other is protective and enclosing - Crusoe closing off things, secreting, hiding, camouflaging. On the one hand he cultivates and landscapes, and on the other he divides his store into ever smaller components within caves, circles of stakes within circles of stakes. [25]

The colonists in Verne's novel experience space in these two ways, exploring, mapping and increasing their knowledge of the island as well as providing for themselves a secure, enclosed space in which to live. However it is the enclosing of space which is predominant, for the island is, after all, being enlosed in the colonial web. The work of the five colonists is to explore, cultivate, map and record. The principal function of language in *L'île mystérieuse* is that of recording. The reporter, Gideon Spillett, dutifully records all the details of the flora and fauna of the island, as well as the achievements of the five inhabitants. This information is then sent (by albatros!) to the outside world. This desire to record and to communicate one's findings can be seen as a wish to render the world intelligible by classifying and cataloguing. Verne makes explicit the analogy between the world and the book (that is to say, the world is readable) in the exchange between Cyrus Smith and the mariner Pencroff. When the latter remarks; "quel gros livre on ferait avec tout ce qu'on sait", Smith reminds him that the vast quantity of still unknown facts would make a much bigger book. (168)

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[25] Michael Seidel, *Robinson Crusoe. Island Myths and the Novel* (Boston: Twayne, 1991) 55-56.

The world/book analogy brings to mind "world book" which in fact describes Verne's project in writing the *Voyages extraordinaires*. According to Michel Serres:

> Le grand impérialisme fin de siècle se reflète, chez Verne et ailleurs, dans cette mainmise du savoir sur l'univers. Alors, la terre cycle, l'espace courbe pour les déplacements, est identiquement, le lieu de l'encyclopédie. [26]

In spite of the fact that the five men in *L'île mystérieuse* are participating in the process of colonization which is a movement of expansion, the representation of time and space in this novel is far more suggestive of the opposite motion, that of enclosing. The measuring of days and years brings the island experience within the enclosure of the calendar. The domestication of the island encloses its physical space within walls and fences, as the mapping of the island and cataloguing of its flora and fauna enclose it within the sphere of the known. The destruction and reconstruction of the island community also suggest circularity. As Roland Barthes affirms, "l'imagination du voyage correspond chez Verne à une exploration de la clôture." For Barthes *L'île mystérieuse* is an expression of the childlike desire of the French bourgeois for security and enclosure:

> L'archétype de ce rêve est ce roman presque parfait: *L'île mystérieuse*, où l'homme enfant réinvente le monde, l'emplit, l'enclôt, s'y enferme, et couronne cet effort encyclopédique par la posture bourgeoise de l'appropriation: pantoufles, pipe et coin du feu, pendant que dehors la tempête, c'est-à-dire l'infini, fait rage inutilement. [27]

This enclosing of the island space has the effect of disenchanting the

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[26] Serres 12.

[27] Barthes 80.

island which becomes less and less mysterious as the novel progresses. [28] Indeed all the factors which suggest the mystery of the island or the hand of Providence prove to have a human cause. Captain Nemo lurking in the subterranean depths in his fantastic submarine, the Nautilus, has been watching and helping the colonists throughout their adventure, playing the role of a benevolent god. The key to the mystery of the island is found, not in the presence of some divinity, as the sailor Pencroff had anticipated, but in yet another enclosed space, that of the Nautilus, "la caverne adorable". [29]

This process of disenchantment of the world was the inevitable outcome of the colonisation process which brought far corners of the globe into the circle of Western European modernity and deprived Europeans of an "elsewhere" in which the exotic imagination might travel. By the 1890s Verne was far less enchanted with the modern world and the wonders of science. His faith in continual progress had waned, as had his enthusiasm for America. This is reflected in the novel *L'île à hélice* published in 1895, which depicts an artificial floating island "paradise."

L'île à hélice.

L'île à hélice is set in an unspecified future time when the United States has annexed Canada and Central America. Its influence has spread throughout the world thanks to its superior industrial power. (4) The Far West has been stripped of all its association with wild adventure. One of

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28 Verne's five Crusoes resemble Defoe's in this respect, but are more extreme in their colonisation efforts due to their superior technical knowledge. Jean-Paul Engélibert notes that Crusoe is perceived as the epitome of modern man because of this process of colonising and industrialising his surroundings: "Le mythe de Robinson serait moderne au sens où il accompagnerait la pensée des Lumières et porterait les idéologies de l'expansion industrielle et coloniale et de l'émancipation des hommes à la faveur du "désenchantement du monde" que Max Weber reconnaissait dans le développement du capitalisme." Engélibert 20.

29 Barthes 82.

the main characters, Yvernès, declares that "la pièce n'est pas digne du décor!" (15) referring to the discrepancy between the majesty of the Californian landscape with its towering sequoias and the lack of opportunity for adventure to be found there. Yvernès is one of a group of four French musicians, "le quatuor concertant" on their way to San Francisco to perform. They are unwittingly lured aboard Standard Island, a floating island built by Calistus Munbar to fulfil the dream of American millionaires.

A state of eternal present seems to have been reached in this floating utopia. All movement and sense of time is circular in this novel. The man-made island follows a circular route. There is no projection into the future, just the round of daily and weekly events. This novel belongs to the era of the end of exploration. Michel Serres sees this as a characteristic of all Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires:*

> Les *Voyages extraordinaires* marquent ainsi la fin de l'âge des voyages, le moment où l'ensemble des passages est forclos. La Terre est finie. Boule dans le filet des routes combinées, dans un système où le réseau des forces est en place. [30]

Although *l'Ile à hélice* is similar thematically to *l'Ile mystérieuse* (a group of men find themselves on an island against their choosing and witness the destruction of the same due to natural forces) there are striking differences between the two. There is in the former the same sense of disappointment with the modern world as expressed in the novels of Loti of the same period. "Jules Verne ne se distingue pas, en ce sens, de l'esprit "fin de siècle" de ses contemporains [....] l'esthétique est la marque pour lui d'une décadence sociale et d'un Crépuscule des Dieux."[31] The "castaways" are no

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[30] Serres 11.

[31] Jean Perrot, "La politique des éléments dans l'oeuvre de Jules Verne." *Modernités de Jules Verne* , (PUF, 1988) 46.

longer colonists but tourists. (Verne uses both the terms "touristes" and "excursionnistes.") The island itself is not a natural space but a man-made object created for American millionaires who have found no place on earth to satisfy their desire for comfort. The island is a result of "cette idée américamécaniquement pratique de créer de toutes pièces une île artificielle qui serait le dernier mot de l'industrie moderne". (49) On Standard Island, as befits the name, all is perfectly ordered. Streets and houses are arranged according to a plan. Parks are inserted in appropriate places. There are no dangers, no poverty and no crime, precisely because the poor are excluded from Milliard city, where the island's inhabitants live. Advanced technology enables the population to live very comfortably. The role of electricity, the harnessing of energy is stressed in this novel, not surprising given the time of its composition not long after the establishment of the Wisconsin hydro-electric plant in 1882.

It is possible to see in the description of Standard Island similarities to the description of postmodern communities which exist today, for example that of Irvine, Orange County as described by Dean MacCannell in *Empty Meeting Grounds*. [32] In Irvine (where cars display bumper stickers declaring "Another day in Paradise"), the dwellings are built according to a rigid code - all earth tones, no garish colours. There is no housing available near the university campus because "students might remain in Irvine for longer than they are in school potentially giving the place a shabby, leftist character." [33] MacCannell sees such communities as Irvine as being built on the model of corporate headquarters:

> If indeed the postmodern ideal is to get every thought and action onto a balance sheet, to extend commercial values

[32] Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992)
[33] MacCannell 81-82.

> into every space and human relationship, the central problem of postmodernity will be to create ersatz 'communities' to manufacture and even to sell a 'sense' of community, leaving no free grounds for the formation of relations outside the corporation. [34]

In the lines quoted above are many parallels with Verne's vision of the future as expressed in *L'Ile à hélice*. It would seem that the movement we see as postmodern was well under way in the 1890's. Jean Chesneaux points out some of the similarities between the two periods. For example, Standard Island is a sub-system functioning independently of the spatial, natural and social environment much like our automated animal rearing systems or the financial sector of Hong Kong. It is a place where everything can be bought and sold including musical talent (the protagonists of Verne's novel who have been brought to the island by underhand means are offered fabulous sums of money in compensation for their performances). There is no industry. Prosperity is not dependent on the exploitation of nature: "Les figures dominantes ne sont plus des ingénieurs démiurges et créateurs à la Cyrus Smith, mais des banquiers parasites." [35] Chesneaux stresses the contrast between *l'Ile mystérieuse* and *l'Ile à hélice*:

> C'est une anti-Ile Mystérieuse, une inversion majeure du projet idéologique des *Voyages extraordinaires*. C'est une société fondée sur le loisir et non plus sur le travail, et qui a donc renoncé complètement à l'héritage saint-simonien. [36]

He likens Verne's negativity to that expressed in the novels of J.G Ballard. In both *l'Ile à Hélice* and *Concrete Island* there is the "déréalisation" of space.

We see in *l'Ile mystérieuse* and *l'Ile à hélice* two different and opposing attitudes towards American society, the first admiring, the second

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34 Ibid. 89

35 Jean Chesneaux, "Jules Verne et la modernité: des *Voyages extraordinaires* à nos années quatre-vingts" in *Modernités de Jules Verne* (PUF, 1988) 57.

36 Ibid.

critical. In the years between 1874 and 1895, the publication dates of the novels, modernity had progressed at a rate which gave rise to some consternation.

Standard Island, just like any present-day cruise-ship, navigates the Pacific Ocean on a previously determined route in order that the inhabitants may always be in a pleasant climate. Just like any present-day tourist the violinist Pinchinat is hoping to see some "couleur locale" in the form of cannibals, but he is gravely disappointed, for the "civilizing" process of colonialism has wiped out such primitive practices:

> O couleur locale, s'écrie le premier violon, quelle main
> t'a gratté sur la palette moderne!
> Oui! Le temps, la civilisation, le progrès, qui est une loi
> de nature, l'ont à peu près effacée, cette couleur. (105)

For much of the journey Pinchinat laments his lost illusions. The exotic "elsewhere" has been erased from the world, due to globalization. We learn that many indigenous peoples have been wiped out by leprosy, "maladie d'importation chinoise." (105) Thus the mingling of peoples due to European colonialism is responsible for the erasing from the world of the original and the natural. Nothing remains uncontaminated.

In both these novels by Verne there are many lists of flora and fauna, but whereas in *l'Ile mystérieuse* the classification of species is done with some exuberance and thrill of discovery, particularly by Harcourt, the world portrayed in *l'Ile à hélice* is a world already catalogued to the point of being tedious. The author ironises this aspect by making Frascolin, the practical member of the quartet, the "Larousse" of the group. The library of Standard Island is able to supply all the facts and figures on the places visited and Frascolin delights in imparting this information to the rest of the group.

The author's insertion of pedantic language into the text is also a means of subjecting the modern world to irony, as when the quartet having escaped a heavy shower of rain arrive at their destination not merely dry but in a state of "siccité parfaite." (14)

The treatment of language in *L'île à hélice* evokes a world in which all discovery has been completed and nothing new exists. Unlike the colonists of the earlier novel who transpose a new world into writing, here the four travellers have become tourists who find that all the places they visit have already been written about. They are merely verifying for themselves the descriptions provided. On Standard Island there is a bewildering mass of information. Newspapers and reviews are brought to the island in large quantity. We are told, however, that the librarian is one of the least busy of the island's employees (81-82) implying that there is little demand for books. The art of reading is further trivialised by the existence of recorded books which save one the trouble of reading (82), and even edible reading material: "Elles [ces feuilles] n'ont d'autre but que de distraire un instant, en s'adressant à l'esprit....et même à l'estomac." (83) When we consider the amount of tedious description and enumeration in this novel as well as the use of overly refined language, we are left with a sense that language, like the space of Standard Island itself, has been cut loose from its moorings and become disconnected from the world. Language, like space and time, is entrapped in an enclosed location. Local papers, printed on the island, circulate local news. Reading material from the outside world is consumed on the island, both literally (the edible books) and metaphorically. We see a relationship between this circularity of language and space and the cyclical nature of time in the following comparison made by Michel Serres:

> Par le modèle spatial ou géographique, par le modèle du savoir et de l'encyclopédie, par le modèle du temps et de l'histoire, on saisit la structure circulaire, close, fermée de ce cycle de cycles. Jules Verne a écrit un ensemble de dictionnaires. Or, qu'est-ce qu'un dictionnaire, sinon un ensemble d'éléments clos par l'opération de la définition. [37]

The closed circuit within which life on Standard Island moves means that nothing really new or exciting can happen. A disaster is required to urge the narrative forward. This disaster (carefully prepared for by the rivalry between the two founding families) occurs when the rival factions give contradictory orders to the engine room, thereby causing the island to spin: "Cependant, avec le mouvement qui s'accentue, Standard Island pivote sur son centre. Le parc, la campagne décrivent des cercles concentriques, et les points du littoral situés à la circonférence se déplacent avec une vitesse de dix à douze milles à l'heure." (335) The four musicians are prisoners of this "immense table tournante qui n'a même pas le don de dévoiler l'avenir." (336) Here the form of the circle is no longer a symbol of safety and security, but one of imprisonment, which can only be broken when the island splits apart. A cyclone subsequently adds to the destruction. The Jeremiah of the group, Sebastien Zorn, has been predicting this all along, saying that such a creation as Standard Island goes beyond "les limites assignées à l'homme par le Créateur."(93) (We are reminded of a passenger on the Titanic who expressed the opinion that declaring a ship to be unsinkable was to fly in the face of God.) Zorn's is the voice of doom predicting an apocalyptic ending to this microcosm of modern society. The possible recreation of Standard Island is considered negatively. The book closes with a warning:

> On ne saurait trop le répéter, créer une île artificielle, une île qui se déplace à la surface des mers, n'est-ce pas

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[37] Serres 15-16.

> dépasser les limites assignées au génie humain,
> et n'est-il pas défendu à l'homme, qui ne dispose
> ni des vents ni des flots, d'usurper si témérairement
> sur le Créateur? (363)

This stands in contrast to the glowing account of the recreation of the utopic Lincoln Island community in Iowa described at the end of *l'Ile mystérieuse* where, "sous la main intelligente de l'ingénieur et de ses compagnons, tout prospéra.....tous furent heureux, unis dans le présent comme ils l'avaient été dans le passé." (865)

The failure of Standard Island suggests the impossibility of creating paradise by artificial means. All the wealth and technical expertise of its creators can do nothing to combat basic human failings or the disenchantment of the modern world which the Robinson Crusoes of Verne's novels inhabit. The island space in Verne's novels is a microcosm of the world in which it is situated. The island space in Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (1967), on the other hand, is an oppositional space, for in this rewriting of the myth: "la quête de l'ailleurs est une conquête, celle de la liberté qui, hors de la société et contre elle, se construit dans la solitude et la jouissance de la pensée pure." [38]

Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique.

The first part of Tournier's novel follows closely the narrative pattern of the original Crusoe story telling of the shipwreck, the initial despair of the solitary Robinson Crusoe followed by the domestication of the island. In the second part of the novel the character leaves the time of modernity and progress and accedes to a state of blissful eternal present.

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[38] Engélibert 109.

Once he has recovered from the initial trauma of being stranded, Tournier's Robinson finds that he has lost track of time and is "réduit à vivre sur un îlot du temps, comme sur une île dans l'espace." (45) He makes a determined effort to conquer both time and space. He finds a means of conquering time by the use of his water clock:

> Il avait le sentiment orgueilleux que le temps ne glissait plus malgré lui dans un abîme obscur, mais qu'il se trouvait désormais régularisé, maîtrisé, bref domestiqué lui aussi, comme toute l'île allait le devenir. (67)

This feeling of mastery over time gives Robinson the power to suspend time itself by stopping the clock. (93) This, however, is not without danger. When he is overcome by the sense of his inexistence in the depths of the cavern, it is the image of the stopped clock which comes to his mind (106) and upon resurfacing one of his first acts is to restart it. (119) The state of inexistence experienced in the cavern is too much like the oblivion of the mud hole which he has made such an effort to overcome. Robinson notes this resemblance in his logbook: "Certes le souvenir de la souille me donne des inquiétudes: la grotte a une indiscutable parenté avec elle." (110) It is Vendredi, who lives himself in "l'instant présent" (190), who shows Robinson the way to a much more satisfactory state of timelessness. The explosion caused by Vendredi and the destruction of Robinson's painstakingly created civilisation bring about a new sense of time. "Le temps s'est figé au moment où la clepsydre volait en éclats. Dès lors n'est-ce pas dans l'éternité que nous sommes installés, Vendredi et moi?" (219) The kind of timelessness achieved by Robinson and Vendredi is not like the oblivion (which is a kind of hiding from time) of the mudhole or cavern, but is instead

a utopic state of eternal youth. It is for this reason that Robinson refuses to leave Speranza when the opportunity is offered in the form of a passage home on the Whitebird, the first ship to approach the island since Robinson's arrival there. He rejects the "tourbillon du temps, dégradant et mortel" which seems to emanate from the ship's crew. (235) This time which he despises falls heavily on his shoulders when he discovers that Vendredi has deserted him. (250) The thought of having to reconstruct his former island existence in order to conquer his solitude fills him with despair:

> Quelle dérision! En vérité il n'y avait plus d'alternative qu'entre le temps et l'éternité. L'éternel retour, enfant bâtard de l'un et de l'autre, n'était qu'une vésanie. Il n'y avait qu'un seul salut pour lui: retrouver le chemin de ces limbes intemporelles et peuplées d'innocents où il s'était élevé par étapes et dont la visite du *Whitebird* l'avait fait choir. (251)

But having once experienced the bliss of intemporality, Robinson feels too old and tired to battle with time once more. He prefers another form of timelessness, that of death, to solitude on the island. It would seem that earthly paradise requires the presence of the couple in order to preserve its spatial and temporal harmony. The island without his companion has lost all meaning for Robinson. Fortunately for Robinson the absent Vendredi is replaced by the cabin boy who, attracted by Robinson's kindness towards him, has deserted ship by taking the small boat in which Vendredi came to the vessel. Thus harmony is restored. "L'éternité en reprenant possession de lui, effaça ce laps de temps sinistre et dérisoire."(254) The ending of the novel is a scene of transfiguration as the rays of the rising sun appear to give Robinson "une armure de jeunesse inaltérable." (254)

There is a sense of circularity in this novel, but one very

different from that expressed in Verne's novels. [39] Whereas in Verne the circular movement of the narrative implies endless destruction and reconstruction, circularity in *Vendredi* is symbolic of perfection and access to mythic time. Robinson has fulfilled the prediction of the tarot cards which opens the novels and has achieved "la Cité solaire." (13) It is interesting to note that according to Captain Van Deyssel, the reader of the tarot, the zenith of human perfection is an image of circularity, the snake biting its tail: " Un serpent se mordant la queue est la figure de cette érotique close sur elle-même, sans perte ni bavure. C'est le zénith de la perfection humaine, infiniment difficile à conquérir." (12) It does seem that, at the end of the novel, Robinson's island experience has allowed him to leave the time of modernity for that of myth. "D'un Robinson qui d'abord mesure, ordonne, domestique le temps, le roman fait un héros "solaire" enveloppé par l'éternité, vivant le présent euphorique d'une jeunesse éternelle." [40]

At the end of his article on the Robinsons of Defoe and Tournier, Anthony Purdy asks what distance has been covered in the time between the two periods in which these Robinsonnades were written: "It is the difference between the capitalist spirit [.....] and what might be called the new primitivism. [.....] It is the distance between economic individualism and symbolic reciprocity, between the profane and the sacred. It is, finally, the distance between 1719 and 1967."[41] Tournier's Robinson belongs very much to an age of transgression (or at least the desire to transgress) which expressed

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39 Jean-Paul Engélibert sees the existence of the myth of eternal recurrence in this novel in a Nietzschean perspective: " L'éternel retour auquel parvient Robinson n'a de sens que dans la perspective nietzschéenne de *l'amor fati* qu'il ouvre; un amour du destin qui permet au héros d'accepter et d'assumer pleinement son existence, de la faire coïncider enfin avec son essence et de se rendre libre." 120-121.

40 Engélibert 110.

41 "From Defoe's Crusoe to Tournier's *Vendredi*." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* June 1984. 216-235 p. 235

itself in Europe and North America in various protest movements against capitalist, materialist, technological society. Robinson's transgression, as we have seen, takes the form of a shift to a mythic time which exists outside the time of the linear progress characteristic of modern capitalist society. Similarly the island space of Tournier's Robinson, once he has discovered "l'autre île", comes to resemble a mythic space far more than a geographical place.

In *Vendredi* the geographical location of the island can be surmised by Robinson but its exact location is not known. Tournier's Robinson, unlike the five castaways in *L'île mystérieuse*, has the sense of existing in limbo, "aux confins de la vie, dans un lieu suspendu entre ciel et enfers." (130) He is the antithesis of Verne's Crusoes, since the emphasis of this novel is on the solitude of the main character. In *le Vent Paraclet* Michel Tournier with customary irony compares Verne's five castaways in *L'île mystérieuse* to magicians performing stupendous feats:

> ...rien dans les mains, rien dans les poches!
> Sur quoi nous assistons à un festival étourdissant d'inventions, de trouvailles, de stratagèmes. On fait du feu, on cuit des briques, on extrait du minerai, on forge de l'acier. [42]

Whereas the goal of Verne's five Crusoes is to outdo Defoe's castaway in their subjugation of the island to human needs thanks to their advanced scientific knowledge, Tournier's re-writing of the Robinson Crusoe myth changes the focus completely. As Cabrol-Weber points out, Tournier situates his story one hundred years later than that of Defoe, thereby placing it in the context of an era of colonial expansion characterised by a morality of accumulation. [43] His aim is to subvert this mode of thought by introducing into the Robinson

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[42] Michel Tournier, *Le vent paraclet* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) 220.
[43] Cabrol-Weber 147.

Crusoe story for the first time an alternative perspective, that of Friday, and thus adapting the legend to the thinking of the time of the novel's creation. "L'idée que Robinson eût de son côté quelque chose à apprendre de Vendredi ne pouvait effleurer personne avant l'ère de l'ethnographie." [44]

Some of the themes implicit in Verne's novel are made explicit in *Vendredi*. The island assumes a feminine form both on the map made by Robinson and in his life, becoming at different times mother and lover. This attitude is implicit in *L'île mystérieuse*, for example, in the phrase "cette île qu'ils avaient fécondée." (858) Like Verne's five castaways Tournier's Robinson seeks to retain a sense of his humanity by writing and by building a house, but Tournier's Robinson is fully aware of the symbolic significance of the dwelling: "Peu à peu cette maison devint pour lui comme une sorte de musée de l'humain où il n'entrait pas sans éprouver le sentiment d'accomplir un acte solennel." (66)

Robinson proceeds to outdo even Verne's castaways in his work of measuring, classification and subjugation of nature:

> Je veux, j'exige que tout autour de moi
> soit dorénavant mésuré, prouvé, certifié
> mathématique, rationnel. Il faudra procéder
> à l'arpentage de l'île [....] Je voudrais que chaque
> plante fût étiquetée, chaque oiseau bagué. [...]
> Je n'aurai de cesse que cette île opaque, impénétrable
> [...] ne soit métamorphosée en une construction
> abstraite, transparente, intelligible jusqu'à l'os. (67)

Robinson undertakes the Herculean task of transforming the island in an

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[44] Ibid. 227. Although Tournier's novel is the only version of the Crusoe story to validate Friday's perspective, this could be seen as simply a transformation of the idea of the "bon sauvage", that is to say, another Western appropriation of the figure of the native. In spite of Vendredi's important role in Tournier's novel, the story nevertheless focuses on Crusoe himself. "L'Araucan est une pure nature: il ne représente pas, malgré la mention de son appartenance ethnique, une culture autre; il incarne bien plutôt l'accord intime et primordial avec le cosmos que suppose la métaphysique nietzschéenne." Engélibert 123.

effort to impose order on chaos. The space of the island is analagous to Robinson's mind. Creating an area of civilization out of wild nature is a victory similar to that of his mental triumph over "la tentation de la souille." (117) The result of Robinson's frenetic activity is the recreation of a civilization which is rendered totally absurd and meaningless because of his solitude as he becomes the governor of an island with no subjects. He faces the dilemma of modern man: the transcendance of nature and domination by the human leads to the creation of "une énorme machine tournant à vide" (140), a metaphor which evokes Verne's Standard Island and implies in both cases imminent disaster.

The image of the castaway on the island retains its power of evocation in three centuries of literature because it stands as a symbol of human solitude, expressing the same existential anguish felt by Pascal's man waking alone on the "île déserte et effroyable" and that of many later generations of thinkers, right up to the rootless postmodern subject. Tournier sees this solitude as "la plaie la plus pernicieuse de l'homme occidental contemporain." [45] He uses the analogy of the glass cage to express this condition: "Il faut briser la cage de verre." [46] This is reminiscent of Baudrillard's work of the same era, *Le Miroir de la production* (1973), in which he talks about the necessity of breaking the mirror of production in order to bring about a society based on symbolic rather than economic exchange: "Et si on veut trouver un au-delà de la valeur (ce qui est en effet la seule perspective révolutionnaire), alors il faut briser le miroir de la production, où vient se réfléchir toute la métaphysique occidentale."[47] In

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45 *Le vent paraclet* 221-222.

46 Ibid. 225.

47 Jean Baudrillard, *Le miroir de la production* (Paris: Galilée, 1985) 46.

Vendredi the break does in fact occur when Vendredi brings about the explosion in the cave and the total destruction of the civilization Robinson has built, thus opening the way for a new life, a new way of relating to the island. Thanks to Vendredi's example, Robinson learns to do away with the world of work and live in complete harmony with nature in an eternal present. When finally, after more than twenty-eight years, the opportunity to leave the island comes, Robinson decides not to relinquish his blissful existence.

The rehabilitation of Vendredi, the desire for some kind of "authentic" relationship with the world, and the opposition to a society of production and consumption expressed in this novel can be seen as belonging to the particular worldview which culminated in the explosive happenings of 1968 in France and similar movements throughout Europe and North America. Following 1968, there came for many of the writers and intellectuals who had hoped for change, a sense of profound disillusionment, a feeling that capitalist, consumer society with its powers of recuperation would always triumph since no oppositional movements could exist. Indeed by the 1970's it would seem that faith in mass movements had evaporated, that Guy Debord's pessimistic predictions concerning the absorption of society into the domain of the "spectacle" had been realised. [48] The Western individual was left high, dry and isolated on a desert island of his (/her) own creation.

The Robinson Crusoe myth is rewritten in novels of the postmodern era as an expression of the isolation of the individual in late capitalist society. One such novel is J.G Ballard's *Concrete Island* in which the protagonist

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48 "Le spectacle est l'idéologie par excellence, parce qu'il expose et manifeste dans sa plénitude l'essence de tout système idéologique: l'appauvrissement, l'asservissement et la négation de la vie réelle. Le spectacle est matériellement l'expression de la séparation et de l'éloignement entre l'homme et l'homme." Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992 (1967)) 164.

Maitland is stranded on a grassy area at the intersection of three motorways near London after a car accident caused by his own carelessness. Although he is surrounded by "civilization" and only feet away from passing vehicles, his isolation is the same as that of the literary Robinsons who precede him. All attempts to escape are futile. No-one will stop to help this man who resembles a tramp. Indeed his changed appearance seems to render him insubstantial as speeding motorists almost run him over. Once the outer shell, the appearance of the wealthy architect, has been removed, it is as if Maitland had fallen off the edge of the world. Thus marginalized in the extreme, Maitland comes to associate himself more and more closely with the island and finally, like Tournier's Robinson, when the possibility of rescue occurs, he too opts to stay on the island and asks that his presence there not be revealed to the rest of the world, thereby making physical his previous psychological alienation.

Maitland has chosen, not so much to live, as to wait for death, amongst the decaying wrecks of automobiles. In the words of Jean-Paul Engélibert: "Dans un univers diégétique voué à l'entropie, le sujet ne semble avoir d'autre avenir possible que la mort." [49] The island in this novel cannot function as oppositional space, as does Tournier's island representation, because it is a microcosm of society from which there is no escape: "La fuite est impossible, car la société à laquelle le ou les héros tentent d'échapper est hégémonique, supprime l'altérité, résorbe les îles dans un continent qui ne connaît plus d'extérieur." [50]

Like *Concrete Island* , Jacques Poulin's novel *Les Grandes Marées* (1978), represents an island space which is a social microcosm. The

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[49] Engélibert 273.
[50] Ibid.337.

protagonist, who is attempting to remove himself from society, suffers the invasion of the outside world.

Les Grandes Marées.

The protagonist of Poulin's novel is a translator known only by his code name of "Teddy Bear". When the novel begins Teddy is living alone on an island in the St Lawrence River. Unlike the characters of Verne and Tournier, this "pseudo-Robinson" [51] living on his desert island in the heart of Quebec has chosen his place of residence. Teddy is a castaway in a social, rather than physical, sense. He is a postmodern Robinson Crusoe in that he is living the ritualized form of a myth in a world where desert islands no longer exist. An ironical relationship to the Crusoe story is established in the reproduction in the text of the notice to shipwrecked sailors which is posted on the door of the "Maison du Sud": Quand vous reprendrez votre chemin, ayez la charité de laisser ce lieu dans un état pareil à celui où vous l'avez découvert, pour que d'autres voyageurs en cas de détresse puissent y trouver, par la grâce de Dieu, un semblable réconfort." (19)

In many ways Poulin's novel is the antithesis of Tournier's. The translator suffers not from solitude but from an excess of company. Whereas Tournier's Robinson overcomes the boundaries of time and space by integrating himself into the life of the island, time for Teddy brings about gradual deterioration. He is haunted throughout the novel by this sense of aging and of the space around him growing smaller. "Le roman *Les Grandes Marées* est un immense chronotope découpé en sept parties d'égale durée réelle (l'intervalle entre chaque grande marée) où l'espace insulaire est

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51 Pierre Nepveu, *L'écologie du réel* (Montréal: Boréal, 1988) 171.

progressivement et irréductiblement réduit."[52] This sense of shrinking space is brought about by the fact that each high tide brings a new inhabitant to the island. The narrative is recounted in episodes. There is no sense of progression, no transformation of the island space.

There are different senses of time in this text. One of these is mythical time. The opening sentence of the novel, "Au commencement, il était seul dans l'île", awakes in the reader who has inherited centuries of Western culture two expectations - an account of creation and a version of the Robinson Crusoe story, for, as J-C Vareille remarks:

> l'image édifie à elle seule une mythologie spontanée, qui rejoint l'autre, la grande mythologie culturelle, en vertu de ce que d'aucuns appellent les contraintes de la chaîne des signifiants. [53]

The few lines of text which follow this opening sentence, however, serve to alter our expectations. As Paul Socken indicates, *Les Grandes Marées* is an ironic version of the Bible story. This mythical time has been inserted into our own era. We learn that in fact the narrator is in radio contact with the boss (referred to only as "le patron" throughout the novel) who brings in provisions by helicopter every Saturday. This island, unlike the one on which Defoe's Crusoe found himself, is one linked by modern means of communication to the rest of the world. We soon learn as well that the island, although uninhabited except for Teddy, is situated in the Saint Lawrence and, therefore, very close to civilization. Unlike earlier Robinsons, Teddy's relationship to the island is not the man/nature conflict typical of modernity: he belongs to the postmodern era in that he takes his

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[52] Jean Levasseur, "Du manuscrit à l'édition princeps; l'histoire d'une grande marée chez Jacques Poulin: la figure du patron," *Studies in Canadian Literature* 17.1 (1992): 53

[53] J-C Vareille, "Pensée mythique et écriture contemporaine. Le mythe en question?" In Pierre Brunel (ed.), *Mythes et littérature* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 1994) 89-92

surroundings at face value and does not seek to dominate the island or to make it intelligible, by exploring and mapping it as earlier Crusoe figures do. Teddy is content to live in the habitable spaces of the island. Unlike the five men in *L'île mystérieuse* or Tournier's Robinson, he is not at all preoccupied with the space of the island on which he lives. On this island no mystery lurks in caverns beneath the surface waiting to be solved. Exploration is undertaken only in a psychological sense, that is to say the preoccupation with happiness or Teddy's quest to find, "le sens de la vie et le sens du travail." (95) It seems possible to view *Les Grandes Marées* as an illustration of Frederic Jameson's definition of the postmodern as a world in which "nature is gone for good." [54]

In *Les Grandes Marées* we find the "more fully human world" to which Jameson alludes. We might say that man-made spaces are significant in the novel - the two houses, the cabin, the tennis court and the path, since almost all the action in the novel takes place in these areas. But, in spite of all this, the opening sentence continues to echo throughout the text. The cultural myth cannot be completely demolished nor deconstructed. It seems possible that this novel contains the "Utopian impulses" to which Frederic Jameson refers, impulses born of a sense of loss:

> What is mourned for is the memory of deep memory; what is enacted is a nostalgia for nostalgia, for the grand older extinct questions of origin and telos. [55]

The sense of nostalgia for deep memory (or myth) is explored in ironical fashion in this novel, in which the characters spend time searching for what they know is unattainable - happiness and definitive meaning. At one point in the novel Teddy's seeks the meaning (definition) of "happy" in the *Petit*

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[54] Jameson ix.
[55] Ibid. 155.

Robert and finds himself trapped in the circularity of the dictionary. (91)

On the island, Teddy seems cut off from the past and future. The past, in the form of memories relating to his brother Théo, surfaces only in fragmentary form. Mostly Teddy lives in the time of daily life with its cyclical motion. He is very much a creature of the contemporary world, worried about meeting weekly deadlines. Unlike the Robinson of Tournier, Teddy cannot stop the clock and seems destined to live in this cycle forever. But the cycle is also one of winding down. Between the scene in which Marie and Teddy are confronted by the silent, immobile man holding the gun on the island of Ruaux (63) and the final scene of the book where Teddy returns to this same point (201), the translator has undergone a process of deterioration. His body has been invaded by a form of paralysis and he has been progressively marginalized as new inhabitants have come to the island.[56]

There would seem to be in *Les Grandes Marées* a sense of the impossibility of escaping from the circle of time (just as the search for definitive meaning leads the character from word to word within the closed space of the dictionary.) In another of Poulin's novels, *Le Vieux Chagrin* (1989), this cyclical nature of experience (and of writing) is expressed. The protagonist, a writer like most of Poulin's main characters, is making an analogy between the process of writing and a journey:

> Quand vous commencez à écrire une histoire, vous êtes comme un voyageur qui a vu de très loin un château. Dans l'espoir de l'atteindre, vous suivez un petit chemin qui descend au flanc d'une colline [.....] à bout de force , vous arrivez enfin devant le château. En réalité ce n'est pas un

[56] Pierre Nepveu in *L'écologie du réel* sees this degeneration as being an expression of the "catastrophisme " of the 1970's, due in large part to the energy crisis of that time: "Chez Poulin, le catastrophisme est actif comme entropie, comme perte radicale d'énergie, provoquant des tentatives de régulation: l'énérgie n'est pas éclatée mais confrontée au désordre, mesurée au moyen de gestes, de postures, mais elle se dégrade malgré tout devant les forces de dissolution." 160

> château, ni un manoir, ni même une villa: c'est plutôt une vieille maison délabrée et, curieusement, elle ressemble beaucoup à celle où vous avez passé votre enfance. (62)

Just at Teddy is confined to circularity in time, also the island confines him in space. Beneath the obvious banality of the descriptions lies a dream-like (nightmarish) sense of space similar to that in Ballard's *Concrete Island*. "Teddy Bear sait et a toujours su qu'il n'y a pas d'autre lieu pour lui que ce Paradis terrestre équivoque dont il sera chassé à coup sûr, d'autre temps que ce temps artificiellement arrêté qui dès qu'il se remettra en mouvement le précipitera vers sa perte." [57] In spite of its proximity to Quebec City, Teddy is trapped on the island. He cannot leave. Provisions and people are brought to him. The "patron", as we learn, will not allow the existence of a boat on the island because it is dangerous (39) and unlike Marie, the island's second inhabitant, Teddy is not a good swimmer. Later in the text, another character, an author, expresses his frustration at finding himself trapped in the space between forest and ocean rather than in the earthly paradise he had anticipated:

> Finalement, c'est tout petit, continue-t-il. Si on tient compte du fait que l'intérieur de l'île est presque aussi impénétrable que la jungle de l'Amazonie, on peut dire que c'est grand comme ma main! Et il n'y a même pas de bateau! (116)

Although on the surface Teddy seems content with, or at least unquestioning of, his situation, the negative side of the earthly paradise is further emphasised by his dream of Alcatraz. (140)[58] The island seems to function as a postmodern simulation of Crusoe's desert island on which Teddy lives out

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57 Gilles Marcotte, "Histoires de Zouaves". *Etudes françaises* 21:3 (1985-6 Winter) 7-17.

58 This possibility of paradise or prison is a feature of other island novels. In both Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and Ballard's *Rushing to Paradise* a potentially idyllic space becomes a place of nightmarish existence.

(physically) his psychological alienation. It is, in fact, a recreation of the work space from which he had sought to escape as we clearly see in the description of the newspaper office:

> Le bureau du traducteur se trouvait au milieu d'une vaste salle divisée en îlots de verdure par un agencement de plantes exotiques et de cloisons amovibles. (13)

Teddy's situation at work resembles that in which many present-day workers find themselves: solitude but no privacy. His life on the island will become a re-creation of this same situation. Teddy has been labelled "socio-affectif" in his place of work and the boss, whose voice is "empreinte d'un grand souci d'efficacité" (13), has decided to remedy the situation by installing him on an island in the Saint Lawrence of which he is the owner. Right from the beginning of the novel, concern for Teddy's happiness is expressed also as a desire for him to be more efficient. Moving to the island brings about little change in the life of this "socio-affectif" since "sans le faire exprès, le traducteur reprit peu à peu dans l'île les habitudes qui avaient été siennes pendant qu'il était à l'emploi du *Soleil*." (17) He settles quite happily into a daily routine not questioning this existence at all.

A nearly impenetrable forest occupies the entire centre of the island. Teddy expresses no desire to explore this or even to speculate on what it might contain. He simply accepts the existence of this unknowable centre and lives on the margin of the island. Movement is limited to restricted space: the two houses, the tennis court in the centre and the single path which connecting these spaces. Teddy's movement among these is akin to the trajectory of a tennis ball.

All sense of dwelling seems temporary in this novel, in keeping with the postmodern ethos of transience. Characters arrive by helicopter carrying

a minimal amount of luggage. Characters with books and sleeping bags regularly drift in and out of Poulin's novels, which form a whole, the same themes and characters reappearing in the different novels. However, transient though the people who arrive on the island may seem at first, they are, it would appear, unable to leave. Tête Heureuse, wife of le patron, packs her bags every week but always decides to stay. As more people arrive, Teddy's space becomes ever smaller until the impression of diminishing space becomes a fundamental part of Teddy's life and fundamental to the organization of the novel. His existence is analogous to the space he occupies. Lamenting his lack of memory he declares: "La seule impression d'ensemble qui me reste c'est que j'ai rapetissé, que la vie a rapetissé autour de moi et que j'ai rapetissé avec elle." (85) It is Teddy's personal space on the island which has shrunk as it has been taken over by the other arrivals. "La dégradation de l'espace influence Teddy d'une autre façon: en le durcissant, en le rendant engourdi et froid." [59] Teddy's response to the invasion of his island space by the outside world is similar to the reaction of the individual to postmodern time-space compression which David Harvey describes: "The first line of defence is to withdraw into a kind of shell-shocked, blasé, or exhausted silence and to bow down before the overwhelming sense of how vast, intractable, and outside any individual or even collective control everything is." [60] But also it seems there is something "cosmic" in Teddy's affirmation, especially if we consider the ending of the novel which involves the notion of petrification. The sense of shrinking in conjunction with the metaphor of petrification evokes the death of a star, the densifying of matter.

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[59] Pierre Hébert, " Jacques Poulin: de la représentation de l'espace à l'espace de la représentation", *Etudes françaises* 21:3 (1985-86): 50

[60] Harvey 350.

Teddy's experience in his island space can be read as an ironical, personalized version of a myth. The island is a postmodern garden of Eden from which Teddy will eventually be expelled. [61] After the initial brief period of solitude on the island, Teddy is given a female companion. Marie's appearance is sudden and unexpected by Teddy. She is flown in by helicopter and descends by means of a rope ladder. No explanation is given for her presence on the island. Very little reference is made to her past life. She is indeed like a new creation, placed on the island by "le patron" to keep Teddy company. (24) At first Marie's arrival brings about a state of stability and happiness:

> Parce que si tu veux, dit-il, on va laisser
> l'île exactement comme elle est. On ne changera
> rien du tout. On ne coupera pas un arbre et on ne
> plantera rien du tout. (60)

It is at this point that the island most resembles an idyllic space, but already the deterioration has begun. Teddy's right hand is becoming "engourdie et froide" (60). As the space of the island is altered by the arrival of more inhabitants so Teddy experiences deterioration in both mind and body, losing his ability to write, to play tennis, and even to think. Finally his inability to function as part of the group leads the others to push him beyond the margin and off the island. Unlike the Robinsons of Defoe and Tournier, Teddy suffers from an invasion of his solitude by other individuals who are supposedly sent to make him happy. These individuals would seem to function like objects in consumer society, proliferating to the point of overwhelming the subject for whose use they are supposedly intended. As Yves Thomas notes, "ce qui frappe chez Poulin, c'est que par l'exercice d'un attrait signifié pour les

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61 Paul Socken interprets Poulin's work in the light of creation myths, seeing the idea of creation at the heart of all his novels. Socken 15.

objets industriels, il est parvenu à en désigner les effets chez ses personnages - légèreté, neutralité, tranquille insignifiance." [62] This "tranquille insignifiance" is apparent in Teddy's relationship to his surroundings.

There is in this novel an emphasis on surface, what might be called a reluctance, on the part of the protagonist certainly, to penetrate the depths - of himself, of meaning, of others. He limits himself to what is perceptible. Ginette Michaud identifies this emphasis on perceptibility as one of the postmodern characteristics of Poulin's novels (" goût pour ce qui est visible, audible, perceptible, amour pour les situations concrètes et les petites complications de la vie, dégoût pour les abstractions, les grandes idées, la réactualisation de genres anciens - contes, allégories, fables, retour à des schémas narratifs mythiques.") [63] Woven into the text of the novel are several anecdotes or stories which emphasise the notion of surface. These suggest the possibility of a meaning, an explanation or resolution of conflict without any such resolution ever materialising. We might say there is mythic form without mythic content.

One such story told by Marie to Teddy is that of "le grand Onychoteutis." "C'est l'histoire d'un combat héroïque et légendaire qui se déroule dans les profondeurs de la mer." (178-9) As is usually the case, Teddy quickly recognises himself in Marie's stories ("le cachalot n'a pas de nom , c'est un cachalot solitaire" 179). This story relates to his refusal to enter into open conflict with the other inhabitants of the island. (174) Teddy assumes his role and participates in the story for awhile. He refuses, however, to allow the

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[62] Yves Thomas, "La part des labels et des marchandises dans *Les Grandes Marées*." *Voix et Images* 1989 15:1 (43) 43-50
Paul Socken also points out the emphasis on objects: "People don't have names, but animals and things do." 53.

[63] Ginette Michaud, "Récits postmodernes?", *Etudes françaises* 29.1 (1985-6) :70.

story to reach a point of resolution and rejects the mythic combat awaiting him in the depths. He opts instead for the surface:

> Ecoute, dit-il, c'est mieux que je te le dise tout de suite: il n'y aura pas de bataille. Le vieux cachalot a décidé de remonter vers la lumière et l'air pur. C'est comme ça. Tout ce qu'il souhaite, c'est de revoir le tapis lumineux et le soleil sur les vagues. (183)

These last lines echo ones spoken earlier by Teddy in response to Marie's series of questions aimed at finding out what is important in his life: "Il y a une chose que j'aime bien. C'est quand, dans les yeux des gens, parfois, on voit passer quelque chose. Une sorte d'éclair qui brille, une sorte de chaleur." (176) The meaning of life like that of words is a fleeting, momentary thing and Teddy is quite happy to accept it as such.

This notion of the fleeting and insubstantial is echoed in various other anecdotes. The image of smoke functions as a leitmotiv in the novel, evoking the fragility of human existence. The passage from Bradbury quoted by Marie: "je vis comme une fumée dans un puits"(48) is echoed in the quotation from the letters of Van Gogh to his brother Théo: "Tel a un grand foyer dans son âme et personne ne vient jamais s'y chauffer, et les passants n'en aperçoivent qu'un petit peu de fumée en haut par la cheminée, et puis s'en vont leur chemin." (84) Then there is the story of the hermit of l'île Saint-Barnabé whose existence is signalled only by the smoke coming from his chimney until: "Au bout de quarante ans, quelqu'un dans le village remarqua, un beau jour, qu'on ne voyait plus de fumée sortir de la cheminée." (95) This last story is inspired by a word in the dictionary which caught Marie's eye, the word "ethereal", defined as "au-dessus des choses de ce monde." (93) These images reflect Teddy's relationship to the island space, which in turn symbolises his place in society. Teddy's presence on the island is not deep-rooted. He has no

relationship to the land itself, but drifts like smoke across its surface. His presence there is barely noticeable or is of little consequence. Smoke is merely suggestive of fire or of life, in the way that words are suggestive of lived experience. Teddy and Marie communicate by story-telling or by the appropriation of another's words to express feelings, experience and relationships.

Teddy's relationship to Théo is expressed by reference to the letters of Van Gogh to his brother of the same name. (83) [64] It is as if life is lived vicariously on the island. No authentic experience or human relationship is possible. The quest for meaning or happiness is transposed to the level of language. As in all Poulin's work the act of writing is all important.

The act of writing itself is compared to the insubstantial or to the promise of a meaning which is endlessly deferred. We see this in the story told to Marie by the writer who has come to stay on the island. She in turn tells it to Teddy. The man at the beginning of the story is another Teddy figure: "C'est un homme qui marche sur la grève....Il a la tête vide et il ne sait pas du tout où il va. Il est tout seul."(120) The discovery of a chest embedded in the sand stirs in him images of treasure (another island association) but, in spite of the many possibilities (of meaning), the chest contains only " du linge moisi, des vieux vêtements de femme" and that, according to the writer, is "l'histoire de l'écriture." Any quest for meaning is fruitless. (122) This notion of the fleeting, the insubstantial with no underlying meaning places *les Grandes Marées* within the category of the postmodern novel, which expresses the sense of ephemerality and fragmentation experienced in the

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64 Sherry Simon points out that this conscious repetition of a narrative is a feature of the postmodern novel: "Condamné toujours à venir "après", le récit postmoderne dit souvent la conscience de répéter et de reprendre une histoire déjà racontée." Sherry Simon, *Le Trafic des langues* (Québec: Boréal, 1994) 75.

latter decades of the twentieth century. [65]

Teddy's response to the sense of living an existence which is without underlying meaning is to act according to a ritualized behaviour pattern, moving amongst people and objects which, for him, have the same status. In *Les Grandes Marées* there occurs an effacing of difference between people and objects. Teddy, for instance, holds his tennis racket "de la même façon qu'il eût serré la main de quelqu'un." (21) Tennis is an important ritual in his life, central to which is "the Prince." Our expectations of some important ritual upon reading that "au milieu de l'île le Prince l'attendait" (22) are disappointed when we learn that the object in question is a computerized machine for throwing tennis balls. In the postmodern world of this island all activity is in a sense ritualized. Pierre Nepveu expresses the idea of a postmodern expression of ritual:

> La forme post-moderne du rituel consiste justement en un rapport ironique et pseudonymique à la culture. Le recyclage est inscrit dans la nature même du cycle rituel comme résurgence, remémoration, citation. Ce recyclage n'est pas la redécouverte d'une vérité ancienne et perdue, mais plutôt une stratégie qui fait ressurgir le connu sur le mode de la surprise, le proche sur le mode du lointain. [66]

This ironic relationship to ritual is apparent in Teddy's elaborate preparations for his game of tennis in the chapter designated as "Le cérémonial." (9) In this postmodern island space mythic form is preserved,

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[65] David Harvey attributes this sense of the fleeting and insubstantial to the intense time-space compression which occurred in the 1960's to the 1980's. Acceleration of production, exchange and consumption along with the transition to less material monetary forms had its impact on culture: " The first major consequence [of the speed-up in the turnover times of capital] has been to accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labour processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices. The sense that 'all that is solid melts into air' has rarely been more pervasive (which probably accounts for the volume of writing on that theme in recent years.)" *The Condition of Postmodernity* 285-286.

[66] Nepveu 170.

although mythic content is absent.

Unlike former Robinsons, Teddy has no need to interact with the natural environment in order to survive, for he lives in a world of consumer products, labelled goods supplied for his use, the origins of which are not his concern. His interaction with these objects is portrayed as a ritual, for example, the breakfast scene common to many Poulin novels in which the same food is eaten at the same time every day. Whereas in previous Robinson stories the making of bread had significance in that this complex process was for the protagonist an affirmation of his humanity, or of his civilized being, in Poulin's novel the much quoted episode of the making of the Graham tart becomes but a parody. Again the activity is ritualized as Teddy follows step by step the recipe, showing a desire for precision which amounts to fanaticism. The process is accompanied by imaginary conversation with Teddy's brother Theo, the adventurer of the family, and antithesis of Teddy. This excessive attention to banal activity has the effect of making the everyday seem strange or hyperreal. We have "le connu sur le mode de la surpise", as Nepveu says. This effect is similar to that achieved by Tournier in *Vendredi* when Robinson's stockpiling goes to such absurd extremes. It would seem that in both these novels objects are foregrounded. Is it possible then that ritual is a postmodern way of imposing order on chaos? The domination of nature which formed an essential part of the modern worldview has been replaced by ritual, since "the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good." In the postmodern space of Poulin's island the struggle to impose order on the environment has been transposed to a struggle with language.

In *Les Grandes Marées,* as in other Poulin novels, language is a central

theme. [67] Therefore it is not surprising to see the dictionary occupying the place once held by the Bible. Just as Defoe's Robinson Crusoe relied on the Bible for guidance and inspiration, so Teddy turns to the dictionary to guide him when he needs to impose some kind of order on the words "qui tourbillonnent dans sa tête". In *Les Grandes Marées* the imposition of order has evolved from man/nature conflict to one of meaning/language. As earlier Robinson figures strove to bring order or civilization to the chaos of the island world so as to render it intelligible, so Teddy struggles unsuccessfully to find an exact translation, to make words give up some definitive meaning. For Teddy, in his solitary state, dictionaries replace the friends he lacks: "Le *Petit Robert*, le gros *Harrap's*, le *Grand Larousse*, le petit *Littré*, le gros *Webster* remplaçaient les amis qu'il n'avait pas." (17). Webster's dictionary is a particular favourite. In the description of it we note analogies to Teddy and his situation on the island:

> Le gros Webster recevait un traitement de faveur:
> à cause de son poids et de sa taille , il avait l'épine
> dorsale assez fragile et Teddy le mettait tout seul et
> grand ouvert sur une table, avec une lampe au-dessus;
> c'est lui-même qui se déplaçait lorsqu'il avait besoin
> de lui. (17)

Teddy with his translator's mania for precision and for finding the exact expression required, functions rather like a dictionary himself. Later in the text the quest for happiness is reduced to a search in the dictionary and is, of course, continually deferred. (91-92) The notion of circularity in *Les Grandes Marées* is that of the vicious circle, in contrast to the movement of enclosing in Verne's island novels and the idea of eternal recurrence in Tournier's *Vendredi*. The chapter entitled "Cercle vicieux" sums up Teddy's island existence, "distractions - difficultés de traduction - mal de dos -

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[67] Most of Poulin' s protagonists are writers.

distractions."(78) Thus the space of the island represents entrapment in the vicious circle. Teddy moves in endless circles seeking to define his existence. If definitions are impossible to find, so are meanings, particularly "le sens de la vie et le sens du travail" (95) the quest for which (though not seriously undertaken) runs throughout the novel. Teddy's reply to Marie's question regarding these, "Je n'ai rien trouvé du tout", pronounced with such a pitiful air that Marie laughs - is the only possible reponse to such emptiness.

Conversational exchanges between characters also have a ritual quality. Marie tries to convey to Teddy truths about himself and his situation by means of story-telling. Just as it is impossible to find a definitive meaning of a concept by looking in the dictionary, so the inhabitants of the island find it impossible to communicate through dialogue, but rather drift from word to word by association and misunderstanding as illustrated in the comic exchange between the professor (himself very much a cartoon character given to uttering clichés about Québec) and the author (struggling to write "le grand roman de l'Amérique" but unable to get beyond the first sentence):

> -Vous avez de la chance, mes amis, d'habiter un pays
> où tout est à faire.....Et quel pays! Ces forêts vierges,
> ces grandes étendues sauvages, ce fleuve superbe...
> -Fuck! rouspeta l'Auteur.
> -Comment? Des phoques? Vous dites qu'il y en a dans le
> fleuve? (98)

There is greater understanding without words as in the "conversation muette" which takes place between Teddy and Marie. (73) As Paul Socken points out, there is portrayed in the novel the notion of the failure of language: "Language is seen to be inadequate, debased, and the object of ridicule.... Communication through language proves futile." [68] There is no real communication, only the ritual of language.

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[68] Socken 54.

Perhaps the greatest ritual activity of all is work. In earlier Robinson Crusoe stories work is a means of survival, but also a way of remaining human. We have seen how the value of industriousness is exalted in *L'île mystérieuse* and then subverted in *Vendredi*. In *Les Grandes Marées* Teddy is certainly hard working. Like any contemporary employee, he worries about the performance of his task and meeting deadlines. All this, however, is reduced to absurdity when it is revealed that the translations of comic strips he has been so assiduously working on are not being published at all and that he has, in fact, been replaced at the newspaper by a computer ("un cerveau électronique") which can translate at super speed. The boss has placed Teddy on the island in order to get him out of the way. (73) This transformation of work into abstract, purposeless activity recalls Baudrillard's affirmation in *Le Miroir de la production* that, in order to sustain itself, contemporary (consumer) society no longer requires that everyone produce but that everyone participate: "Car le système n'a plus besoin de la productivité de tous, il a besoin que tout le monde joue le jeu." [69] Teddy refuses this participation and is eventually expelled from the island. There is a sense in this novel of progressive removal from reality or from a meaning or purpose. This loss of meaning is perhaps inherent in any alienating modern society where work becomes increasingly disconnected from basic survival. Teddy differs from earlier Robinsons in that for him survival on the island means doing his job of translating comic strips. By virtue of being a translator Teddy is already one step removed from the language. His isolation is intensified by his lack of communication and detachment from the other inhabitants, all of which makes it impossible for the space of the island to realize its potential as

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[69] *Le miroir de la production* 148.

an idyllic place.

The man alone on the island in *Les Grandes Marées* links to earlier literary representations of the same topos in a significant way in that the island is associated with the quest for happiness. (In many mythological systems the island is inaccessible to all but a chosen few and represents both earthly and spiritual happiness.) Early on in the novel, we note an association between happiness and ritual established in the exchange of words between Teddy and the boss:

> ....le patron lui posa la question rituelle:
> -Etes-vous heureux dans l'île?
> -Très heureux, dit Teddy.
> - Vous êtes sûr? insista-t-il.
> Teddy fit signe que oui. Il y avait une grande
> sollicitude dans les yeux du patron. (10)

Thus the boss is seen as a god-like figure who drops down to earth in his helicopter from time to time in order to check up on the world he has created. His role recalls that of Nemo in Verne's *L'île mystérieuse* except that, in postmodern fashion, his preoccupation is with the personal happiness of his subjects rather than their intellectual advancement. Whereas Nemo was a hero (quasi-mythic) figure because of his knowledge of science and engineering, the boss in *Les Grandes Marées* owes his status to his superior performance in the world of finance. He is "le poète de la finance" (54), an implication that talent and creativity leading to success in the commercial world entitles one to superior status. Indeed, the island world represented in this novel is very much a space in consumer society and so it is not at all surprising that the novel expresses aspects of the same 'mal de siècle' examined by Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Baudrillard and Debord refer to the sense of unease arising from the world of spectacle and simulation

which we have now inhabited for the past three decades. [70] It must be noted, however, that Teddy, certainly at the beginning of the novel, shows no trace of "mal de siècle" having what may be seen as a natural rapport with the objects which surround him. "Le rapport de Teddy aux marques de commerce et aux produits de consommation n'est pas un d'aliénation, plutôt maniement d'un code, d'une langue dont on n'oublie pas la fonction essentiellement pragmatique." [71]

Jean Baudrillard sees the contemporary preoccupation with individual happiness as being a facet of consumer society.[72] It is indeed possible to draw several analogies between Baudrillard's *La Société de consommation* (1970) and Poulin's novel. The former stresses the fundamental role of happiness in consumer society: "c'est la référence absolue de la société de consommation: c'est proprement l'équivalent du salut." [73] In the vision of society which Baudrillard criticizes happiness is obligatory and members of society must be continually increasing their happiness by consuming more products . Those who are content with what they have run the risk of being accused of a-social behaviour. (113) This is indeed the fate of Teddy in *les Grandes Marées*. Because he is generally unresponsive to the stock of happiness which the boss forces upon him by way of sending additional inhabitants to the island, Teddy himself is finally rejected, having been declared "en dehors de la marge" (198), and expelled from the island.

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[70] For Guy Debord contemporary society is one where the individual, like Poulin's translator, experiences extreme alienation in a world where there can be no interaction with the environment, for everything is image: "Le spectateur ne se sent chez lui nulle part, car le spectacle est partout." Debord 16.

[71] Nepveu 173.

[72] The pursuit of individual happiness is not, of course, an invention of the postmodern era. It is the legitimation of this pursuit, its valorisation above all other concerns which seem peculiarly postmodern.

[73] *La Société de consommation* 59.

The people brought onto the island by the boss's helicopter, with the exception of Marie who does use her real name, are presented as types (the Professor, the Writer, the Ordinary Man) whose role is to improve Teddy's life, to make him happier. It seems we have here an example of what Baudrillard calls "la mystique de la sollicitude" (252), something which occurs in a society where human relationships have broken down and have been replaced by simulations:

> La perte de la relation humaine (spontanée, réciproque, symbolique) est le fait fondamental de nos sociétés. C'est sur cette base qu'on assiste à la réinjection systématique de relation humaine - sous forme de signes - dans le circuit social. [74]

The Writer, the Professsor, the Ordinary Man, the Social Animator and the Doctor can be seen as signs which are representative of a concern for Teddy's well-being. But these signs, as do the objects of consumer society, take on a life of their own and overwhelm the person whose happiness they are supposed to bring about. This is because the "immense système de sollicitude" is itself also a system of production: "production de communication, de relation humaine, de services. Il produit de la sociabilité." [75] The result of such a system is to achieve the opposite of what it claims: "Destiné à produire de la sollicitude, il est voué à produire et à reproduire simultanément de la distance, de la non-communication, de l'opacité et de l'atrocité." [76] Non-communication is evident, as we have seen, in the conversations of the inhabitants of the island, this " monde conçu comme un Global Village McLuhanien, peuplé de spécialistes de plus en plus spécialisés qui ne parviennent plus à s'entendre et à se traduire en cette nouvelle tour de Babel"

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[74] Ibid. 255.
[75] *La Société de consommation* 257.
[76] Ibid.

in the words of Ginette Michaud. [77]

According to Baudrillard, the fatigue from which employees suffer is a form of resistance to the system. We can see Teddy's progressive "petrification" in this way. As the island is invaded by more inhabitants Teddy finds himself unable to work on his translations because his concentration is disturbed, and unable to play tennis because his right hand is becoming "engourdie," which is to say that he is unable to perform the two main rituals which make up his life. Teddy is experiencing the effects of entropy as a gradual loss of energy. The island space is shrinking around him, forcing him to withdraw into himself and slowly wither away. Unlike Verne's five island colonists who witness a dramatic destruction of their island, Teddy's island is taken from him by the banality of consumer society. Edged towards the coast of the island by the other inhabitants, Teddy is forced to take to the water and swim towards the neighboring island. Reaching the shore he is confronted by the figure of the old man:

> L'homme qui se tenait à l'orée du bois, était vieux et très maigre. Il portait un fusil sur la hanche. Il avait des lunettes. Il ne faisait aucun mouvement.
>
> Le traducteur réussit à s'approcher du vieil homme. Quand il fut tout près, il se mit debout et lui toucha doucement le visage. Le vieux n'était pas vivant: il avait la peau dure comme la pierre. (201)

This enigmatic description closes the novel. It is as if Teddy is facing a future image of himself, a petrified figure, vainly attempting to ward off newcomers to the island. His life on the island, so Poulin seems to suggest, will repeat itself. The island space cannot represent an escape from postmodern society, since it is a microcosm of that very society. Individuals may indulge in the illusion of living a separate existence in the "elsewhere" of island space, but

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[77] Michaud 68.

in fact each island is a small replica of the all-encompassing contemporary world. [78]

In all of the novels we have studied here the island represents an enclosed space in which can be observed the relationship of characters to their environment. Whether the island functions as paradise or prison, utopia or dystopia depends fundamentally on the way in which the characters relate to space, which in turn is determined by their particular worldview. The five colonists in *L'île mystérieuse* set about the domination of the virgin island with great enthusiasm creating a modern utopia. The musicians aboard the floating island in *L'île à hélice* discover the dystopia inherent in modernity. Tournier's Robinson finds a way to leave the space and time of modernity and succeeds in re-enchanting the island space, albeit through a process of self-dehumanization. Finally, Poulin's protagonist in *Les Grandes Marées* experiences the dystopia of island space as consumer society crowds in on him.

In these novels, with the exception of *Vendredi*, the island is represented as a potential mythic space, but one which cannot stand outside the social world of its time. Only Tournier's Robinson achieves a total transformation of his relationship to the island space and is thus able to make it truly a mythic space, a genuine "elsewhere."

We shall turn now from the enclosed space of the island to the vastness of the desert, which also functions in Western literature as a potential space of opposition to modern or postmodern life.

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[78] Jean-Paul Engélibert sees the same impossibility of evasion from society expressed in Ballard's *Concrete Island* and Paul Theroux's *Mosquito Coast* (1981): "la fuite est impossible, car la société à laquelle le ou les héros tentent d'échapper est hégémonique, supprime l'altérité, résorbe les îles dans un continent qui ne connaît plus d'extérieur." Engélibert 337.

Chapter 2.

The Desert and the Quest for the Holy Land.

Like the islands studied in the last chapter, the desert also has potential as a mythic space in that it is the antithesis of modern, industrialized society. Deserts, like the virgin islands of the Robinson Crusoe legacy, are considered in Western imagination as empty space largely untouched by human civilization. Thus the desert provides an oppositional space to the modern world. In another respect it is the opposite of the island, since it is seen as limitless in contrast to the enclosed space of the island.

Since Biblical times the desert has held a prominent place in Western culture and is therefore a space rich in symbolism. Through its representation in the book of *Exodus* it is associated not only with the trials and tribulations of exile, but also with spiritual revelation. In Western imagination the desert lies at the threshold of the promised land. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the boundless space and dazzling light of the desert have exerted their fascination on numerous writers and artists, many of whom have sought there an antidote to the stresses of urban living. [1]

This chapter will explore the topos of the desert and the quest for the promised land in a selection of late nineteenth- and late twentieth-century novels, with the aim of determining how the representation of the desert topos is influenced by the era of its creation. The works of the writers in question here, Pierre Loti and Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, incorporate the discourses of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century respectively. It is

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[1] One such author is Gustave Flaubert whose *Voyage en Egypte* portrays desert landscapes which are both real and mythical. As Pierre-Marc de Biasi writes in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *Voyage*, "L'Orient imaginaire de l'enfance et de l'adolescence...part à la rencontrede l'Orient réel qui va devenir sa vraie patrie pendant plus d'une année." Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Egypte* (Paris: Grasset, 1991) 21.

possible, if somewhat limiting, to see their work in terms of colonial and post-colonial writing. It was the process of colonialization which allowed Loti to travel to "exotic" lands thereby furnishing material for his novels. Whether seeking exotic experience or, as in the case of *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem*, spiritual experience, Loti is engaged in the pursuit of "elsewhere values lost with the modernization of European society." [2] The novels of Le Clézio, on the other hand, reflect the opposite trend by representing the Western world, in particular the large cities of France, through the eyes of a colonial subject. What the two writers have in common, of course, is the fact that they both represent the space of the desert and its inhabitants from a European perspective. The representation of the desert topos by two European authors writing largely for a European reading public shows above all changes in European thinking over the course of a century.

Pierre Loti's *Le Désert.*

The account of Pierre Loti's spiritual quest which took him across the Sinai Desert to Jerusalem and Galilee is told in the novels of the Holy Land Trilogy, *Le Désert, Jérusalem* and *La Galilée* , although "novel" seems scarcely an accurate generic term for these works which are a mix of travelogue descriptions and Loti's pessimistic musings on the vanity of all things and the emptiness of "modern" life in particular. We shall focus here on the first two books of the trilogy in which a sense of disenchantment is all pervasive as we follow the author across the Sinai Desert and into the most holy places of Jerusalem, where Loti finds what he has expected to find all along: a spiritual vacuum beneath the trappings of tourism.

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2 Bongie 5.

We shall then compare Loti's sense of disenchantment with his time to that of another author, J. M. G Le Clézio, whose novels express a similar disillusionment with the industrialized, technological world of the late twentieth century. In the works of both these authors, the space of the desert occupies a prominent place as does the quest for Jerusalem. However, the representation of these spaces reflects two very different ideologies. In many ways perhaps the work of Le Clézio is an attempt to re-enchant the empty world which so troubles Loti. Accepting the modernization process as complete, Le Clézio creates in his novels the sense of a mythic "elsewhere" which exists as mental space and can be accessed through language.

We shall pay particular attention here to the notions of time, space and language in order to study the similarities and differences which exist in the *fin de siècle* thinking of two centuries. The notion of shrinking space is common to both the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Loti's journey to the Holy Land took place in the 1890's, a time when the process of colonization by the European powers was well under way, leaving little territory unexplored. During the same period the American West was closed to further colonization and so, as Stephen Kern points out, there was a feeling in Western society that no "empty space" was left anywhere in the world.[3] Similarly our own globalized society lives with a sense of shrinking space and overcrowding. Many of the once far away, exotic areas of the world have now become commonplace tourist destinations. Rapid advances in transportation systems have made most places easily accessible. However it is not only in a physical sense that the world has shrunk. The advance of capitalism with its globalizing tendencies has today drawn almost all aspects of life into its

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[3] Kern 139.

economic web, creating the impression that there is no place left to go beyond its boundaries. For both Loti and Le Clézio, the desert is thus the antithesis of the modern world, a place outside both the time and space of modernity. Edward Saïd sees this notion of a place outside the time and space of the Western world as a fundamantal element of Orientalism, which "denudes the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region. But Orientalism has taken a step further than that: it views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West." [4] Although both Loti and Le Clézio portray the space of the desert as the antithesis of modernity, they relate to this space in very different ways. Loti's perspective is very much that of the European colonizing subject, whereas Le Clézio adopts what we might see as an "ecological" attitude, whereby the human subject is fully integrated into its space of existence. [5]

Similarly, there is a change in the sense of time from one century's end to the next. The sense of ending is common to *fin de siècle* sensibility as is apocalyptic thinking. This may take the form, as is the case in the writing of Jules Verne, of an impending cataclysm or, as in the decadent thinking current in late nineteenth- century Europe, of a process of degeneration. In our own time, we feel threatened by ecological disaster. [6] Both Loti and Le Clézio express a nostalgia for what is past and can never be recuperated, but

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4 Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979.) 308.

5 Jean Onimus emphasises the "ecological" aspect of Le Clézio's work inspired by the many journeys undertaken by the author into areas of the world where "primitive" forms of existence can still be found.
In Le Clézio's *L'inconnu sur la terre* there is explicit reference to this perspective: "Je voudrais qu'il n'y ait pas de différence entre les éléments et les hommes, entre la terre, le ciel, la mer et les hommes."
Jean Onimus, *Pour lire Le Clézio* (Paris: PUF, 1994) 116.

6 Eugen Weber draws parallels between ecological discourse and millennial thought in his book *Apocalypses* (Toronto:Random House, 1999).

what is most striking in Loti's writing is the sense of frozen time. In the work of Le Clézio, there is a much more dynamic sense of time, a mingling of past and present and an attempt to create through writing a sense of some mythic timelessness.

In 1894 Loti's writing turns away from the representation of the exotic in the form of sensual experience and takes a "travelogic" approach. [7] *Le Désert* recounts a journey across the Sinaï Desert undertaken by the author/ narrator, a journey which is a spiritual quest for the traveller who follows in the footsteps of Moses. His account of the journey takes the form of a journal in which the precise dates and quotations from *Exodus*, which are used as chapter headings, mark the stages of his itinerary. This process of record keeping and mapping links Loti's writing to the colonial era in which he was writing, maps and accurate records being the tools of appropriation. But, in *Le Désert*, what Loti is mapping above all are his own mental processes as he accomplishes his fruitless spiritual quest, which he will refer to in the second part of the trilogy, *Jérusalem*, as "mon pèlerinage sans foi." (21) The theme of this novel is not the desert itself , but its effect upon the writer. As Todorov says:

> La vie de Loti s'oriente vers un seul but: constituer une collection de sensations, ou mieux d'impressions [...] le pays étranger est bien là, qui provoque l'apparition du livre; mais il n'entre pas dans le livre lui-même: on n'a affaire qu'à l'effet, qu'à l'impression, qu'à la réaction subjective. [8]

Loti gathered sensations as material for his writing in the same way that he recreated the Orient in his house in Rochefort. Both the home and the text function as a stage decor in which Loti is the principal actor. The

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[7] Bongie 104.

[8] Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres* (Paris: Seuil, 1989) 342-343.

textualisation of this collection of impressions results in a narrative which resembles the modern tourist's photograph album in which moments in time and sections of space are frozen by the eye of the camera. Thus space is detached from lived experience.

Though Loti's pretext for the journey through the desert is the undertaking of a *spiritual quest* [9] the reader of *Le Désert* has often the impression that the journey to the Holy Land is more the acting out of a *spiritual fantasy* for which the space of the desert provides an appropriate decor, just as in earlier novels far away places furnished the background for exotic/erotic adventures. It is, therefore, not surprising that there is little political comment in Loti's novels. When the author does lament the effects of colonization, it is not out of sympathy for colonized peoples, but rather out of a dread of losing the last remaining space untouched by modernity. In his article "Economies of scale", which examines, among other things, the relationship between colonialism and exoticism, Anthony Purdy states: "If Loti, as a fervent anti-modernist, objects to certain effects of colonialism, it is on grounds that are neither political nor moral but purely aesthetic: in a word, colonialism is bad only when it spoils the illusion, when it allows the world to intrude upon the archaic, exotic picture that Loti so carefully constructs around himself." [10] One of Loti's major objections to colonialism and modernity is the banalising, leveling effect of these movements which threaten to make all the places of the world resemble one another. Loti expresses his apprehension towards modern, Western society in *Madame*

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[9] Loti states the reason for his journey as follows: "pour essayer de voir encore, sous l'envahissement des hommes et des choses de ce siècle sans foi, la sainte Jérusalem, j'ai voulu y venir par les vieilles routes abandonnées et préparer mon esprit dans le long recueillement des solitudes." (27)

[10] Anthony Purdy, "Economies of Scale: the world as picture," *Literature and Money* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993) 211.

Chrysanthème,where he predicts that,

> Il viendra un temps où la terre sera bien ennuyeuse à habiter, quand on l'aura rendue pareille d'un bout à l'autre, et qu'on ne pourra même plus essayer de voyager pour se distraire un peu. [11]

This complaint might well have been uttered by present-day tourists, dissatisfied with the time and space in which they live, deploring the fact that globalization has deprived travellers of an "elsewhere" to which escape is still possible, but not considering the fact that they are a prime contributor to the situation in which they find themselves. Kristin Ross has observed that in many ways certain writers of the last three decades of the nineteenth century anticipate the modern tourist, finding themselves in the position of "the solitary explorer, who, seeking virgin territory, uncharted worlds, suddenly notices he has brought his whole world along with him." [12] Loti is indeed travelling with a quantity of preconceptions under the cloud of a *fin de siècle* sense of ennui which drains the life and colour from all he observes. Alec Hargreaves sees the "ideological luggage" which accompanied Loti on all his journeys as "an obsession with death, together with a counterbalancing nostalgia for childhood." [13] This obsession influences the spatial representation in *Le Désert*, in which the landscape is portrayed as lifeless and empty. The narrator is forced to recognize that the ideal he is seeking in this place is irretrievably lost. Thus the spiritual quest takes on the appearance of an empty ritual. The world then becomes a stage upon which Loti is the sole actor. "L'auteur s'est déclaré le seul sujet à bord." [14]

There are several scenes in *Le Désert* which indicate Loti's sense

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11 *Madame Chrysanthème* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy) 7.

12 Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1988) 95.

13 Alec Hargreaves, *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1981) 24.

14 Todorov 355.

of rôle playing. He is often both spectator and actor in the theatre of the desert. Suzanne Lafont very aptly describes him as "le metteur en scène de lui-même." [15] From the outset of the journey he adopts Arab dress, not only because this is more practical for the climatic conditions but also because: "on doit à autrui de ne pas promener dans son tableau de désert la tache ridicule d'un costume anglais." (31) Later, in the crypt of the burning bush, the author and his companions dress in oriental costume out of consideration for the artists who decorated the crypt. They reject "les vêtements de notre siècle mesquin et impie" in order not to appear "profanateurs envers les artistes enfantins et splendides d'autrefois." (65) Here, as in the later novel *Jérusalem*, we are aware of the polarisation of Loti's thinking. The past, the Biblical past or the author's own childhood, contains all that is good whereas the present is mean, shabby, and small-minded. Arab dress for Loti is associated with a superior past. In Jerusalem, he expresses admiration for figures who evoke for him characters from the Bible. In this respect, his writing imitates that of Chateaubriand whose *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811) [16] is a long lament for a textual world, one which exists only in the Bible and written accounts of the Crusades. Compared to this lost world of text, the lived experience of place is an enormous disappointment.

For Loti, aesthetic preoccupations tend to dominate spiritual ones even in the most holy of shrines. In this respect his account is far more that of a tourist than of a pilgrim. The spiritual quest seems forgotten in the pleasure of describing the sacred objects which surround him. Self-awareness is rarely absent from his writing, to the extent that he expresses regret at the lack of an

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15 Suzanne Lafont. *Suprêmes clichés de Loti* (Toulouse: PU du Murail, 1993) 8.
This is a very appropriate image given that the writer, Julien Viaud, became one of his own characters by choosing to use the name of Loti.

16 René de Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968).

audience: "Nous nous disons même que nos costumes, dont les couleurs s'avivent les unes par les autres, doivent faire bien sur le fond des vieilles chaux blanches et les rouges granits. Mais personne n'est là pour nous voir." (62) Loti is never able to lose himself in the contemplation of the places he visits. The most he can do to escape the modern society which he so despises (or affects to despise) is to constitute himself as figure in a painting or as actor on stage: "L'Orient est le théâtre idéal de sa représentation [...] sa possibilité d'être exotique à lui-même." [17] Unlike Le Clézio, as we shall see later, Loti separates human subject and space. Space in Loti's novels is an empty container, much like the theatre, in which human activity unfolds.

Since the author's own impressions form the main subject matter of the text, any other human presence is relegated to part of the decor. The desert as described by Loti is an empty, lifeless place: "Et tout de suite, autour de nous, c'était l'infini, vide, le désert au crépuscule, balayé par un grand vent froid; le désert d'une teinte neutre et morte, se déroulait sous un ciel plus sombre que lui, qui aux confins de l'horizon circulaire, semblait le rejoindre et l'écraser." (30) There are few plants or animals in this desolate place and the inhabitants of the desert, the Bedouins who accompany the author on his journey are, in general, treated with contempt, since they tend to spoil the decor, being "domestiqués, serviles, première déception de mon voyage." (28) They are momentarily redeemed, however, when a certain light embellishes them, thus improving the picture somewhat: "Et la lumière virginale de sept heures épand sa magnificence sur cette scène primitive, glorifie ces hommes en haillons immondes, ennoblit leurs grands gestes et les drape comme des dieux." (87) (The word "immonde" establishes itself in Loti's vocabulary as a

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17 Lafont 165-166.

cliché befitting nomads and later the Jews of Jerusalem.) Thus the Bedouins form a living tableau on which the sun casts a spotlight.

In an earlier scene there is a semblance of pity for these people, but never once does Loti step down from his position of superiority. At the monastery of Mount Sinaï famished Bedouins, to whom access to this place is denied, await the customary distribution of bread at the foot of the walls, whilst the Europeans watch from the ramparts. In the account of this scene the narrator is preoccupied, not with the spectacle before him, but with himself as spectacle: "Nous devons leur sembler des princes des *Mille et une nuits*, nous promenant en vêtements de soie dans le soleil d'en haut." (68) In this way, the narrator marks the distance between himself (the observer) and the inhabitants of the country and also places them along with himself in the context of a book, *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Very rarely do we have in *Le Désert* any sense of a real place with real inhabitants, for Loti's observations are entirely coloured by his readings and his preconceptions: "His conceptual framework, preoccupations and value system were intensely personal, but they owed virtually nothing to non-European cultures. They remain substantially the same throughout a literary career spanning nearly half a century, conditioning the literary presentation of his travels without in turn being modified by the places he visits." [18] Obviously, in the scene just described, the admiring glance of the desert nomads is a projection of European self admiration. In *Le Désert*, where sight is the dominant sense, the inhabitants are for the most part as silent as the place in which they dwell, for the author/narrator permits no voice other than his own to express what it means to exist in this space. Where nomad

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[18] Hargreaves 80.

voices are heard they are described as "clameur" or "hurlements" (83-84) and so the native populations of the desert space assume the status of the camels and other animals which they tend. In Loti's representation of these people they are not perceived as a cultural entity with a history of their own, but rather as pieces in a stage set.

Loti's novel aptly illustrates Edward Saïd's affirmation that the Orient is represented in Western thought (Orientalism) as being fixed in time and space. [19] However, this immobility which constitutes a negative attitude for Saïd, is a positive quality for Loti. In an earlier novel, *Aziyadé*, the author expresses the idea of immobility as paradise, an end to the vicissitudes of life which torment him:

> Qui me portera, moi, dans un paradis quelconque? quelque part ailleurs que dans ce vieux monde qui me fatigue et m'ennuie, quelque part où rien ne changera plus, quelque part où je ne serai pas perpétuellement séparé de ce que j'aime ou de ce que j'ai aimé. [20]

Jacques Huré sees this world-weariness as an attitude belonging to the fin de siècle, a "désir de rejoindre un espace épargné par les risques de l'entropie."[21] Loti's writing freezes the desert in time and space in reaction to a sense that the time and space of modernity are progressing at a vertiginous rate and that the onward movement of time brings only degeneration. For Alain Quella-Viléger this is typical of the author's reaction to the whole colonial movement: "Regresser par plaisir dans les âges reculés, s'engloutir à souhait en des mondes figés hors du temps, c'est vouloir oublier que l'An 1889 est

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19 Op. cit. 4.

20 *Aziyade* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1989) 148-149.

21 Jacques Huré, "Une écriture fin de siècle, Pierre Loti à Istanbul," *Fin de siècle. Terme-évolution - révolution?* (Toulouse: PU du Mirail, 1989) 303.

déjà celui d'un futur condamnable, celui de la colonisation rampante." [22] In Loti's representation the space of the desert resembles a still-life painting or rather an exhibition of such paintings which the traveller observes as he moves across the desert. In his book *Colonizing Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell shows how this way of seeing the world as an exhibition is very much a feature of nineteenth- century colonialism. According to Mitchell, in the metaphysics of capitalist modernity, the world is experienced as an ontological distinction between physical reality and its representation (the world-as-exhibition). Like visitors to an exhibition, travellers in the Orient acted as spectators seeking the significance of what they were seeing:

> Hence the European visitors to the Middle East[....]
> tamed into scholars, soldiers and tourists, as docile
> and as curious as the millions who visited the exhibition,
> take up their deliberate posture towards its towns and its
> life, and implore the spirits of significance to speak. [23]

The idea of imploring the spirits of significance to speak seems particularly apt in the case of Loti, whose journey across the desert and pilgrimage to Jerusalem is in fact a search for meaning, that meaning which is absent (for Loti) from the modern world. The emptiness of the desert mirrors the psychological void experienced by Loti, whose quest fails to bring him to the desired mythic space. This absence of meaning permeates the text of *Le Désert*, reducing landscape to empty decor.

The fact of representing space as a painting, which Loti does frequently, gives the text a static, abstract quality and all sense of real space is evacuated

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[22] Alain Quella-Villéger, *La politique méditérranéenne de la France. 1870-1923* (Paris: Le Harmattan, 1991) 34. Although Quella-Villéger is referring here to Loti's *Au Maroc*, the quotation applies equally well to the Holy Land trilogy.

[23] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley: U California Press, 1991) 62.

from it. [24] Many of his descriptions use the techniques of painting and photography. Suzanne Lafont stresses this point in her book on the clichés used by Loti:

> C'est bien en effet l'impression d'une oeuvre encombrée de clichés qui domine pour le lecteur d'aujourd'hui. A l'époque de Loti, les avis étaient partagés sur son style, mais si l'on parlait à son propos de clichés, c'était le plus souvent par métaphore photographique, pour souligner l'exactitude de ses notations. [25]

It is the author's quest for exactness in describing the space of the desert which transforms this very space into a collection of abstract forms or areas of colour. Consider Loti's description of the gulf of Akabah:

> L'ensemble des choses est rose, mais il est comme barré en son milieu par une longue bande infinie, presque noire à force d'être intensément bleue, et qu'il faudrait peindre avec du bleu de Prusse pur légèrement zébré de vert émeraude. Cette bande, c'est la mer, l'invraisemblable mer d'Akabah; elle coupe le désert en deux, crûment... (112-113)

The artist's eye transforms space into form and colour. It is interesting to note that reality is called into question here, for it is the sea of Akabah itself which is "invraisemblable." The landscape would seem to exist solely for the purpose of providing material for the artist in the same way that the desert exists to provide Loti with sensations. We see Loti the aesthete at work here transforming space into the "merely picturesque." [26] In such representation space is deprived of its association with political, cultural and historical reality. Thus it is dissociated from the modern, colonial world. In that sense

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[24] As Elwood Hartman reminds us Loti was an artist/illustrator as well as a writer. Elwood Hartman, *Three Nineteenth Century French Writer/Artists and the Mahgreb* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994)

[25] Lafont 8.

[26] Bongie 104.

the space of the desert constitutes the "elsewhere" sought by Loti, but it is a lifeless "elsewhere."

If *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* leave the reader with an impression of utter lifelessness, it is largely because of Loti's concentration on geological formations and archictectural forms: the rocks of the desert and the stones of Jerusalem form a significant part of the subject matter of the texts. Pierre Citti compares notions of space in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, noting that space for Loti and Huysmans constitues the "non-moi":

> A l'arrière-plan, il [l'espace] est indistinct et met en valeur la solitude du moi. Mais au premier plan, il est anormalement, monstrueusement immobile et mort. [27]

Citti sees in these "decadent" authors a hostility towards space:

> Que l'horreur du vide rejoigne la terreur d'être enseveli vif est caractéristique d'une représentation irrémédiablement hostile de l'espace et du milieu, le moi passif, hésitant entre la peur d'être précipité ou d'être emmuré. [28]

This sense of horror is depicted in many of Loti's descriptions of rock formations in *Le Désert* as in the following passage in which the author and his companions set up camp on a winter evening:

> Par mille mètres d'altitude environ, nous campons, au crépuscule d'hiver, entre des roches de cauchemar. C'est à l'ouverture d'une vallée large, sorte de plaine, murée de partout comme avec des amas de monstres morts. (55)

The above quotation bears out Citti's affirmation, suggesting the "terreur d'être enseveli vif." Later in the text, the narrator falls prey to the opposite sensation as the desert's vast, open space causes a sense of disquietude:

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[27] Pierre Citti, *Contre la décadence. Histoire de l'imagination française dans le roman 1890-1914* (Paris: PUF, 1987) 267.
[28] Ibid. 270.

> L'homme des maisons de pierre, qui s'est formé au fond de nous-mêmes par des atavismes si longs, s'angoisse vaguement de n'avoir pas de toit, pas de murs, et de savoir qu'il n'y en a nulle part alentour, dans ce désert assombri dont l'étendue fait peur.....(55)

The adverb "vaguement" in the quotation above has the effect of diminishing the force of the emotion expressed (anguish). Such understatement occurs frequently in *Le Désert*. It is as if the author were struggling unsuccessfully to find meaning in the landscapes he depicts, a meaning which always eludes him. There are certain incongruities noticeable in Loti's descriptions: rock formations are, on the one hand, depicted as belonging to some pre-human era, but yet described in architectural terms. The following passage deserves quoting at length as it is illustrative of several of Loti's preoccupations:

> Finies, les cendres d'hier. Maintenant, ce sont des granits roses, des mondes de granits roses que traversent ça et là , comme de géantes marbrures, des filons de granits bleus. Nous cheminons dans une pénombre et dans un silence de sanctuaire, suivant des couloirs naturels, qui sont comme des nefs d'église agrandies au delà de toute proportion humaine, jusqu'au vertige et jusqu'à l'épouvante. Dans ces défilés, qui ont dû s'ouvrir lors des premières convulsions de la terre, les siècles sans nombre ont créé un sol exquis, en émiettant les cimes, en nivelant ensuite tous les débris [...] On dirait des rivières de sable, unies et tranquilles dans lesquelles viennent plonger et mourir tous les piliers, tous les contreforts soutenant les monstrueuses murailles debout. - Il faut de tels lieux, que ni l'homme ni la nature verte n'ont jamais touchés, pour nous faire encore un peu concevoir, à nous très petits et préoccupés de choses de plus en plus petites, ce qu'ont dû être les formations de mondes, les horreurs magnifiques de ces enfantements-là. (102-103)

Geology and paleontology were very much nineteenth-century

preoccupations. Much debate existed over the age of the earth. The result of this was a change in human consciousness. As Stephen Kern puts it: "The history of man came to appear increasingly as a parenthesis of infinitesimal brevity." [29] This is the feeling Loti evokes in his contemplation of these rocks which have known "des siècles sans nombre." We see in the above extract several of Loti's favorite clichés - "vertige" and "épouvante" for example. Here the author is attempting to capture the sense of the vastness of space and time beyond human dimensions. Although a fearful prospect in one sense, the contemplation of this vastness gives a sense of the sublime which contrasts with the "choses de plus en plus petites" with which the modern world is preoccupied. Whereas Jules Verne, in *L'île mystérieuse,* exults in the representation of geological forces and the wonders of the cosmos (and in man's ability to study and understand these), Loti evokes the same forces in a moralising tone, in order to show how far man has fallen since the great upheaval of the world's formation. In Verne's novel creation and destruction occur in a cycle. In *Le Désert* only the moment of creation is sublime, then follows the downward spiral of history, culminating in the small-mindedness of the modern age. In this description Loti is attempting to evoke a sense of the cataclysmic origins of the world and thus return to some mythic space and time existing beyond the limits of every day experience. This is the goal of his spiritual quest, but the result is what Suzanne Lafont refers to as "cadres vides qui ne font écrin à rien." [30]

In another passage Loti reduces the landscape to pure form - "cônes superposés". Although he is observing "des formations géologiques, jamais dérangées par les hommes", he notes that "on dirait qu'une main a pris soin

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[29] Kern 38.
[30] Lafont 27.

de les trier, de les grouper, par aspects à peu près semblables." Again the architectural is brought in to describe the natural: "comme des débris de cités fossiles." The most surprising commentary comes at the end of this particular paragraph:

> Et on reste confondu devant la recherche et l'inutilité de ces formes des choses, - tandis que tout cela *défile* dans le même silence de mort, sous la même implacable lumière, avec toujours ces parcelles brillantes de mica, dont le désert est pailleté ici comme un manteau de *parade*. (40-41)

This is somewhat of a reversal of the notion of the sublime and fearsome rock formations described earlier. The words "défile" and "parade" imply that these formations are presenting themselves (for judgement) before the gaze of the observer. Not only is the uselessness of the rock formations evoked, but also from Loti's perspective these rocks are seen as filing past the observer who is immobile. Such a description is suggestive of colonial subjects under inspection by a commander. This might explain somewhat the rigidity of Loti's descriptions and the sense of lifelessness which pervades his landscapes. They are ordered by the colonial gaze and thus frozen into patterns. [31] The author is then disappointed that the spirits of significance refuse to speak. We shall see later in *Jérusalem* that the inhabitants of that place, like the rock formations of the desert, are also made to march before the observer.

In both *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* Loti expresses a sense of

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31 This notion of the colonial gaze is explored in Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt*. Mitchell equates the process of colonization with the reorganizing of space and the act of enframing. The space colonized is then regarded as an exhibition from which the observer stands apart: "The more the exhibit drew in and encircled the visitor, the more the gaze was set apart from it." (8) Like the colonizers of whom Mitchell writes, Loti positions himself as observer and in his writing he orders the space he sees.

disappointment which arises from the fact that the spiritual (mythical) places of this world only have power when seen from a distance. The reality of the modern world defeats his hopes of transcendance as soon as the distant object is brought into close-up. The optimistic sentence which ends the first novel - "Demain matin, au jour levé, nous monterons vers Jérusalem!...." (207) is negated on the opening page of the second - "Jérusalem!.... Oh! l'éclat mourant de ce nom!.... [...] je veux simplement essayer de noter les aspects actuels de sa désolation et de ses ruines." (21) The nostalgia for the mythic space remains, although the author accepts the reality of its disappearance from his world and contents himself with lamenting its passing. Modernity and Imperialism exclude the possibility of the exotic and the spiritual. In the case of Mount Sinai, Loti's lament is rather reminiscent of that of the contemporary tourist who always feels he has arrived too late and missed an "authentic" experience:

> Hélas! Comme elle est silencieuse, sinistre et froide cette apparition de la montagne très sainte, dont le nom seul, à distance, flamboyait encore pour nous. Les temps sont trop lointains sans doute, trop révolus à jamais, où l'Eternel y descendit dans des nuées de feu, au son terrible des cors; fini tout cela, elle est vide à présent comme le ciel et comme nos modernes âmes; elle ne renferme plus que de vains simulacres glacés, auxquels les fils des hommes auront bientôt cessé de croire. (56-57)

Loti's lament, his affirmation that men will soon have ceased believing even in the remnants of religion ("vains simulacres glacés"), brings to mind Fredric Jameson's statement regarding the sense of loss and nostalgia for myth of the postmodern era. [32] For Loti, at least, the questions of origin and telos were already extinct by the 1890s. For Loti the ending of the century

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[32] Op. cit. 156.

signals the final demise of spirituality. *Le Désert* is haunted by a feeling of death and emptiness in a disenchanted world. The nostalgia for origin and telos is a very personal one for the author as well as one lived by modern man in general. He can never recapture what is lost, that is to say the childhood paradise. No matter how many jouneys he undertakes, the quest always proves futile and glimpses of the past or projections into the future will always seem superior to the experience of the present. Todorov comments on Loti's quest for lost sensations: "Les sensations s'émoussent, les impressions ne marquent plus: alors pour les ranimer, on part en voyage, même si ce qu'on trouve n'est souvent qu'une pâle copie de ce dont on avait rêvé." [33]

Loti's journey is a journey in time as well as in space. We have seen that space in *Le Désert* is represented largely by means of petrified descriptions. There is also a sense of time being frozen. In fact what Loti is seeking on his quest across the desert to Jerusalem and in the Islamic world is timelessness; an antidote to the rushing pace of modernity which is rapidly engulfing the whole world. The ideal mythic space which he seeks is one in which time has ceased. He seeks to reintegrate the lost world of purity which existed before human history where the air is "irrespiré, vierge comme avant les créations." (36) For Loti, time in the desert stands still and seems at different moments in the text to be either the time before the existence of humanity or the time after its demise. There are several instances in *Le Désert* where the author delights in experiencing the sensation of having stepped outside the time of human history and of having surpassed "ces leurres éphémères, les forêts, les verdures ou les herbages" in order to arrive

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[33] Todorov 343.

at "la splendeur de la matière presque éternelle, affranchie de tout l'instable de la vie; la splendeur géologique d'avant les créations." (46) [34] Once more we observe a note of caution on the part of the author in the use of the word "presque" which indicates an ever present sense of the possible degeneration of even the most solid matter. This same obsession with degeneration and decadence surfaces in a later scene at Akabah: No evidence of human presence is to be seen in this timeless, enchanted place bathed in Edenic light. Amidst this "splendeur d'apothéose" the author's gaze is drawn to the rotting carcass of a camel, a reminder of the inescapability of death. (127)

In this text, Loti attempts to give a sense of the vast dimensions of time. The description of rock formations leads to reflection on the long and laborious work of nature:

> Pendant des millénaires et des millénaires,
> les pluies, les effritements, les éboulements,
> ont dû travailler là avec d'infinies lenteurs,
> mettant à nu les filons les plus durs, détruisant
> les veines plus tendres, creusant, sculptant, émiettant,
> avec des intentions d'art et de symétrie, pour créer
> ce simulacre de ville effrayante et surhumaine,
> dans laquelle nous avons déjà fait vingt lieues
> sans en prévoir la fin. (90)

In the above passage Loti seeks to express the magnitude of time and space whilst preserving a sense of the human in the image of natural forces sculpting and creating.

For Loti the attraction of the desert resides in its immobility in time. This immobility is a quality which he believed the Islamic world in general

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[34] In this respect Loti differs very much from Verne. Although both authors evoke the grandeur of the natural world in relation to which man is very small indeed, Verne's depiction of nature focuses on its changing aspects, on the cycle of destruction and recreation. Loti's depiction of the natural world concentrates on the static and unchanging. Verne's novels anticipate future cataclysmic natural changes, whereas Loti's writing (at least in this trilogy) dwells more on the origins of the earth.

possessed. As is the case with many authors of both earlier centuries and our own, Loti makes no attempt to portray Islamic culture and its people as actual living entities. Instead he focuses on what Islam represents *for him*, taking delight in his own presence in this space where, at one moment, he feels like a ghost standing in the moonlight in the empty, silent gulf of Akabah: "l'immobilité de l'Islam et la paix de la mort sont épandues partout.... Et il y a un charme très indicible à se tenir là, muets et blancs comme des fantômes, à la belle lune d'Arabie; sous les palmiers noirs, devant la mer désolée qui n'a ni port, ni pêcheurs, ni navires." (123) This description is somewhat reminiscent of the experience of the time-traveller in H. G Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), who travels into the future only to be confronted by an empty, silent world of rock formations. [35] Loti's travelogue and Wells' science fiction novel, written within a year of each other, share a similar view of time and space. For Loti, looking back in time, and for Wells, anticipating the future, the world is a empty, inhuman place.

As Suzanne Lafont indicates, Loti's evocation of time and space in *Le Désert* bears little relation to lived experience: "Les repères spatiaux du voyage sont les lieux-dits de la Bible; les repères temporels renvoient à un temps regressif, mythique, livresque; la climatologie même est un pastiche de la Genèse." (151) The journey across the desert is as much a journey in time as in space, a quest for a mythical past which modernity ("notre siècle mesquin et impie" 65) has destroyed. He consistently values the past above the present, because the past is closer to the lost world of spirituality for which he yearns. However, Loti, the decadent and aesthete, seems often to accept willingly theatrical substitutions for that lost world.

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[35] H.G Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Random House, 1931)

Such is the case in the crypt of the burning bush where the author, dressed in oriental costume, is shown various precious relics and he imagines that the monk who acts as guide "doit être en tout semblable aux illuminés des époques premières" and that the light which enters "a l'air d'être quelque lueur des jours anciens." (66)

The same substitution of role-playing for spiritual meaning occurs in the next bok of the trilogy, *Jérusalem*. Loti continues his quest for mythic time and space in the Holy City which, he discovers, has been unable to resist the invasion of modernity.

Jérusalem.

As we have already seen, holy places for Loti have power over the imagination only from a distance. That is to say that the power is contained in the name itself. The lived experience of space proves always to be a great disappointment which serves only to confirm his beliefs about the baseness and small-mindedness of the modern age in which he has the misfortune to live. At first sight, Bethlehem holds the promise of a sought- after spiritual place: "Oh! Bethléem! Il y a encore une telle magie autour de ce nom, que nos yeux se voilent.... [...] je pleure en regardant l'apparition soudaine; regardée du fond de notre ravin sombre, elle est, sur ces montagnes aux apparences de nuages, attirante là-haut comme une suprême patrie..." (38) It is the naming of the place (notre guide nous l'indique de son lent geste arabe, en disant: "Bethléem!...") which gives rise to this evocation, but reality, as we saw earlier in the case of Mount Sinaï, cannot live up to the name: "Plus rien de l'impression première bien entendu: elle n'était pas terrestre et s'en est allée à jamais...Cependant Bethléem demeure encore, au moins dans certain quartiers, une ville de vieil Orient à laquelle s'intéressent nos yeux." (40) The

only relationship between subject and space which occurs here is through the gaze. This implies a very superficial, "touristic" attitude. For Loti any attempt to explore what lies beyond the surface of the gaze results in extreme disappointment. Entering Christ's birthplace ("la grotte de la nativité") brings total disillusionment:

> Ce nom de Bethléem, qui rayonnait, il vient de tomber pitoyablement à nos pieds, et c'est fini; dans un froid mortel, tout s'effondre [...] Oh! pourquoi sommes-nous venus; pourquoi n'être pas partis tout de suite, retournés vers le désert, ce matin, quand du fond des vallées d'en bas, Bethléem encore mystérieuse et douce nous est apparue? (42)

For Loti, it seems, a place only holds the possibility of fulfilling desire when it is still shines in the distance, lying either before (Bethlehem) or behind (the desert) the observer. Indeed the word "rayonner" occurs frequently in *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem*. The end of the quest is continually deferred. The only acceptable time and space is that which lies between the departure and the arrival.

Much of the disillusionment expressed by Loti stems from his search for a space which exists solely on a mythical level. Like Chateaubriand, Loti carries with him an image of Jerusalem constructed from the Bible and accounts of the Crusades. Modern Jerusalem will always be inferior to this image. There are several instances in the novel where Loti steadfastly turns his back on modernity, refusing to see it as a facet of the Holy Land. For him, only the biblical Jerusalem is authentic. He is delighted at catching a glimpse of "un coin de l'antique Jérusalem", adding: " l'ensemble en paraît millénaire, abandonné et mort; mais c'est bien Jérusalem, la Jérusalem qu'on a vue sur les vénérables tableaux et images d'autrefois; au sortir de l'horrible banlieue

neuve, où fument des tuyaux d'usine, on croirait une vision sainte..." (52) Later in the text, when modern buildings intrude upon the author's gaze, he quickly dismisses them with the phrase "auxquelles, du reste, nous tournons le dos." (84) Thus Loti attempts to erase from the picture anything which clashes with his vision, but, unfortunately for him, modernity is not so easily dismissed, particularly when it manifests itself in the form of tourism. Loti's indignation seems quite comical at times and is very reminiscent of that of the present-day tourist who cannot bear the thought of other tourists crowding his space. This is especially apparent in the description of Jericho at dusk. The sound of a bedouin flute is heard, then the call of a hyena. The tranquil atmosphere is destroyed by a group of German tourists:

> Maintenant, voici même un refrain inattendu des estaminets de Berlin qui éclate tout à coup, comme en dissonance ironique, au milieu de ces bruits légers et immuables des vieux soirs de Judée: des touristes allemands, qui sont là depuis le coucher du soleil, campés sous des tentes des agences; une bande de "Cooks", venus pour voir et profaner ce petit désert à leur portée. (121)

This is one of the many instances in this text where value is placed on what is old and unchanging (vieux, immuable), as opposed to the continual movement and change of modernity. We note, too, that the German tourists merit only "ce petit désert à leur portée" not the grandeur of the one Loti has crossed.

Modernity for Loti means decay and degeneration. [36] He laments the passing of ancient times when Solomon's gardens flourished: "Fini et anéanti, tout cela; non seulement les palais ont disparu avec les temples et les

[36] Loti's writing participates in the discourse of decadence prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century. In France politicians, writers and thinkers expressed a belief in the physical and moral degeneration of the population as well as the deterioration of the environment. "Doom loomed more clearly in fin de siècle France than almost anywhere else." Weber 3.

églises; mais aussi les dattiers, les beaux arbres rares ont fait place aux broussailles sauvages..." (119) Civilization has reverted to wilderness. In Loti's text, people and places are subject to the same fall from grace. Particularly noticable are the negative epithets attached to the Jewish population of Jerusalem and the Christian pilgrims, many of whom are poor, old, and sick. The latter are described at one point as "vomis par le petit chemin de fer de la côte; pour la plupart déplaisants et vulgaires." (144) The words "immonde" or "immondices" are regularly applied to the Jews and their quarter (150-151), also "opprobre" - shame for having killed Christ: "Il y a un signe particulier inscrit sur ces fronts, il y a un sceau d'opprobre dont toute cette race est marquée." (106) Loti's blatant anti-semitism has often been attributed to the age in which he lived, but it seems also that his own sense of colonial superiority (and protestant upbringing) lead him to despise these poor and wretched populations whilst he expresses an admiration for the Arabs whose costume, bearing, and buildings seem to him far superior. This superiority, to Loti's way of thinking, stems from the static nature of Islam. The Islamic world is portrayed as being free from the decay which haunts the Jewish and Christian world. [37] He is relieved to leave the Jewish quarter: "c'est un soulagement de revoir, au lieu des têtes basses, les belles attitudes arabes, au lieu des robes étriquées, les amples draperies nobles." (108) We note once again that smallness or tightness (étriquées) is expressed as a negative quality in Loti's writing. People and places are subject to the same comparison, as we see in the case of the Mosque of Omar which stands out in contrast to the Holy Sepulchre:

Autant cette place du Saint Sépulchre constamment

[37] Alain Quella-Villéger discusses Loti's belief in the regeneration of the West through through Orient: "Il [Loti] est très attaché à l'idée romantique d'une régénération de l'Europe par l'Asie ou l'Orient, celui-ci devenant un lieu de libération." 24.

> ouverte à tous, est étroite, écrasée et sombre, autant il y a d'espace, du vide, et de silence, là-bas autour de la mosquée bleue. (160)

In *Jérusalem*,this mosque is always represented as a space of peace and tranquillity amidst the turmoil of Jewish and Christian Jerusalem. It is as though time did not flow here, whereas in the Christian and Jewish quarters the inexorable march of time and human history is ever present to the senses. Interestingly, for Loti, human history is best told not through words but in the stones of buildings.

Just as Loti concentrated on the rocks of the desert for many of his descriptions in the earlier novel, here the emphasis is on stones - those of the many ancient buildings which make up Jerusalem. The rocks of the desert evoked a time before the human era while the stones of Jerusalem represent layer upon layer of human history, most of which has crumbled and decayed. The word "entassement" occurs frequently, as at the approach to the tomb of Abraham:

> Nous frôlons en chemin de monstrueuses pierres de soubassement qui doivent être contemporaines des rois hébreux. A cette tombée de jour, on sent les choses d'ici comme imprégnées d'incalculables myriades de morts; on prend conscience, sous une forme presque angoissée, de l'entassement des âges sur cette ville, qui fut mêlée aux événements de l'histoire sainte depuis les origines légendaires d'Israël." (31)

This accumulation gives a sense of claustrophobia, of being buried alive, even though the feeling of anguish is attenuated by the use of the word "presque." The mention of these layers of history in stone suggests most strongly the impossibility of the author finding what he seeks: the authentic past. "Que de révélations sur les temps passés pourraient donner les fouilles dans ce vieux

sol, si tout cela n'était si fermé, impénétrable, hostile." (31) The biblical past is forever locked away from observation and exploration: "les souterrains impénétrables renferment les authentiques tombeaux d'Abraham, de Sarah, d'Isaac et de Jacob." (30) Again it seems that the spirits of significance will not speak for Loti, being, this time, too deeply buried. The author does indeed seem destined to remain always on the surface of the space he visits, unlike his contemporary, Jules Verne, in whose works the topos of the cavern and its exploration is a common occurrence. Although both authors were undoutedly influenced by the scientific discoveries and technological advancements of the age in which they lived, they display very different reactions to these. Whereas Verne delighted in the new discoveries, incorporating them into every novel (yet adding a few dire warnings against hubris), Loti, showing no scientific curiosity, expresses a total rejection of modernity, seeing in the rocks of the desert and the places of the Holy Land, not a fertile ground for geological or architectural exploration, but only decay and death. Both authors express the notion of the rise and fall of civilizations. In Verne's work, as we have seen, the image of eternal recurrence is used to express this notion, whereas in the works of Loti, there is more of a sense of a fall from grace and a spiralling downwards towards utter oblivion. This is apparent in the description of the area surrounding the Mosque of Omar where the remains of many civilizations can be seen in the architectural features. There are constructions from the time of Solomon and of Herod, also evidence of the damage done to these during the Crusades. Time has brought decay to everything:

> Le temps niveleur a jeté sur le tout son uniforme couleur de vieille terre cuite rougeâtre, ses plantes de murailles, son même délabrement, sa même poussière. L'ensemble emmêlé, fait de pièces et de

> morceaux, formidable encore dans sa vieillesse millénaire, raconte le néant humain, l'effondrement des civilisations et des races, répand une tristesse infinie sur le petit désert de cette esplanade où s'isole là-bas le beau palais bleu surmonté de sa coupole et de son croissant, la belle et l'incomparable mosquée d'Omar. (66)

Again we see how, for Loti, Islam (represented here by the mosque) is able to withstand the ravages of time which beset the other monuments.

An image which sums up Loti's impression of Jerusalem is that of the "musée de débris." The building next to the mosque is "comme un musée de débris de tous les temps." (67) Parts of the ancient ramparts of Jerusalem uncovered by archeological exploration fail to inspire the author with any sense of awe: "Toutes ces choses massives et frustrées [...] font l'effet de ces débris morts qui gisent dans les musées, - sauf qu'elles sont restées en place." (92) Again we see the resemblance between Loti's text and the lament of many late twentieth-century tourists for whom the whole world has become a gigantic museum.[38] Concentration upon objects (and the objectification of people), the transformation of sacred things into artefacts, renders them lifeless. This utter lifelessness haunts Loti's text. Suzanne Lafont sees this as the main theme of his work: "Car ainsi se présente la thématique lotienne: la momification conserve la vie dans son travail de mort; au contraire la mise au jour des momies ne ramène que des cadavres." (147)

We might see Loti's text itself as a collection of debris; descriptions of the remains of buildings or of the faces of the sick and aging pilgrims.

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[38] Dean MacCannell's *Empty Meeting Grounds* (op. cit.) and *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* by Sally Price, (Chicago: UP, 1989), contain interesting discussion of the idea of the transformation of the world to suit the demands of Western tourists. This is much the same notion as Timothy Mitchell's "world as exhibition" in the nineteenth century colonial period. In both the modern and postmodern eras, so it appears, the ordering of space from a European perspective (or gaze) is a form of Western domination, which results in the perception that meaning has been evacuated from the world.

Underlying this collection is the eternal longing for the authentic, the spiritual: "Quand la foi est éteinte dans nos âmes modernes, c'est encore vers cette vénération si humaine des lieux et des souvenirs, que les incroyants comme moi sont ramenés par le déchirant regret du Sauveur perdu." (62) The authentic will surface only occasionally in fragmentary form and will quickly be dissipated by the present: " Des instants de compréhension du lieu où nous sommes - et alors d'émotion profonde, - mais tout cela furtif, troublé, emporté par le bruit, par le vent, par le voisinage des locomotives et des agences. (50)

The impression left on the reader by this text is in fact one of fragmentation and confusion. Loti frequently uses the word "Babel" to express his impression of Jerusalem with its multitude of languages and cults and the superposition of structures from many epochs. At the Holy Sepulchre there is chaos and confusion: "Aucun plan d'ensemble, dans le fouillis des églises et des chapelles qui se pressent autour de ce kiosque très saint." Consequently, "tous les autels, de toutes les confessions différentes, sont tellement mêlés ici qu'il en résulte de continuels déplacements de prêtres et de cortèges." (59) The holy shrines of Jerusalem are thus seen as arenas of competition with the faithful from many different cults jostling each other to find a space in which to worship. Loti hopes to escape this confusion and to indulge in a true spiritual experience by spending a night praying in the garden of Gethsemani. Just as he donned Arab dress in order to participate more fully in the experience of the desert, Loti will act out the role of Christ in Gethsemani in his search for a true spiritual experience. Ritual form is substituted for spiritual meaning, but can never provide access to the mythic space sought by Loti.

As we have seen in *Le Désert*, Loti tends to relate to the space in which he is travelling by using it as a stage on which he is the principal actor. His first attempt to experience Gethsemani is thwarted. Instead of the hoped for silence in this place "dont le nom seul, à distance, avait le grand charme profond", he finds the funeral of the Russian orthodox archbishop taking place and reacts contemptuously to the crowds witnessing the event: "cet enterrement pompeux, ces gens quelconques attroupés là pour un spectacle." (98) Later, he reproaches the Franciscan monks who take care of the garden with having transformed it into "quelque chose de mesquin et de vulgaire." (100) As usual, Loti is objecting to the fact that reality fails to correspond to the picture he carries in his imagination. His visit to Gethsemani at night is first of all disrupted by a group of Jewish people who have the effrontery to be returning from a burial along the path Loti is taking. They are treated with his usual contempt and customary cliché: "On sait que chez eux c'est l'usage, à n'importe quel moment du jour ou de la nuit, de faire disparaître tout de suite, comme chose *immonde*, les cadavres à peine froids." (154) Perhaps Loti finds this so objectionable because he himself revels in the dead, mummified remains of the places through which he travels. Finally the author is able to enter the garden where he will assume the role of Christ and attempt to re-enact the night of prayer. Again, sight is the dominant sense in this quest for the ultimate spiritual experience as Loti looks around, imagining what Christ would have seen on that night. The outcome of this experience is no surprise either to the author or the reader, having been prepared throughout the text:

> J'attends je ne sais quoi d'indéfini que je n'espère pas,
> - et rien ne vient à moi, et je reste le coeur fermé [...]
> J'attends, et les instants passent, et c'est l'évanouissement
> des derniers espoirs confus, c'est le néant des néants où
> je me sens tomber. (156)

In short, the author has found exactly what he had expected to find beneath the accumulated layers of history and the Babel of language and religions - nothing. At this point the narration returns to the travelogue mode with a banal incident which occurs at the gate of Jerusalem concluding the chapter. Loti having accepted that there is no significance, no centre, decides, apparently, that one may just as well make the most of being a tourist. As Suzanne Lafont says, what Loti accomplishes in his texts is "raconter l'éternelle dissipation du sens." (148) The juxtaposition of travelogue and meditation tend to negate the value of the latter or rather to emphasize Loti's role-playing. Loti is a character in his own books. The spiritual and the exotic have for him the same value.

As a tourist Loti never abandons his sense of his own superiority. As in *Le Désert*, people and objects parade past the author for inspection: "Tout cela se déroule sous nos yeux en un immense tableau d'abandon et de mélancolie." (84) This superiority is particularly apparent in the scene which takes place in the Greek Orthodox church where the author and his companions are allowed to view precious religious artefacts. These are brought before him as if he were some great lord: " C'est là devant le maître-autel, au milieu de ce décor archaïque et superbe, que des prêtres au beau visage encadré d'un capuchon noir et d'une barbe noire, nous apportent une à une les pièces du Trésor."(147) This is very similar to the episode of the "crypte du Buisson ardent" in *Le Désert* mentioned earlier. In both these episodes the religious artefacts are deprived of any spiritual significance because they are presented as objects of consumer society offered for consumption by tourists. Loti is, in a sense, attempting to purchase a spiritual

experience, by contemplating these objects. He cannot help but be a participant in the modern age which he so despises.

In *Jérusalem*Loti behaves as a tourist whilst trying staunchly to turn his back on modernity. He values sights and sounds - a pastoral scene or a form of dress - which most closely correspond to the mythical Jerusalem which exists in his mind. He values above all "la vie biblique dans toute sa splendeur et sa grandeur." (25) Such moments, however, are rare, for most of this text is devoted to recording the decay and degeneration which has taken place in Jerusalem.

In *Jérusalem* there are moments when the author is trapped between an unretrievable past and a totally uninspiring future. The past is frozen into the ruins, monuments and tombs of Jerusalem. Modernity is seen as an ice age:

> [Les ruines] Témoins des âges de foi à jamais morts elles semblent attendre quelque réveil qui ramènerait vers la terre sainte les peuples et les armées , mais ces temps-là sont révolus pour toujours et les regards des hommes se portent à présent vers les contrées de l'Occident et du Nord, où les âges nouveaux s'annoncent effroyables et glacés. (37)

This sentiment is echoed later in the text in a personal reflection by Loti when he bemoans the fact that he cannot return to being a believer nor can he accept willingly the fading of religion. He cannot "marcher avec les multitudes qui dédaignent le Christ ou l'oublient" and so he is constrained to live in limbo, searching for Christ among the dead. (93) In fact, the whole text is haunted by death and decay, notably in the descriptions of the tombs of the valley of Jehoshaphat (75) and the Jordan river whose waters are described as "jaunes et limoneuses." (117) The famous biblical river has been reduced in

stature: "Il n'est plus aujourd'hui qu'un pauvre fleuve quelconque du désert; ses bords se sont dépeuplés de leurs villes et de leurs palais; des tristesses et des silences infinis sont descendus sur lui comme sur toute cette Palestine à l'abandon." (118) In this respect, Loti's text reflects the decadent thought of the fin de siècle, a spiritual malaise existing in an era of economic growth and improving social conditions. In both *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* there is an atmosphere of*Götterdämmerung;* past glories are gone forever, ruined by contact with the masses. Nowhere is this made more clear than in the image of Christ shrinking over the centuries - "rapetissé pour avoir passé pendant des siècles à travers tant de cerveaux humains." (130) Loti longs for the grandeur of the original, the authentic. History is perceived in a negative light, for it is the layers of history which blur the original. Loti, who sees himself as "triste moi composite qu'ont produit les générations et les siècles" (142), expresses a longing for some pure, whole yet mythical past. He would like to find a spiritual centre in both his composite self and in the layers of history and Babel of tongues that make up Jerusalem, but he must be content with recovering fleeting fragments of faith:

> Et d'ailleurs, je bénis même cet instant court où
> j'ai presque reconquis en lui l'espérance ineffable
> et profonde, en attendant que le néant me réapparaisse
> plus noir, demain. (169)

And so *Jérusalem* ends on a note of complete disenchantment. The spiritual quest has failed, just as the author expected it would. Modernity is inescapable even in Jerusalem and the only solution for Loti is the retreat into his own personal museum-like home in Rochefort where he can live in the manner of Des Esseintes surrounded by artefacts.

The representation of time and space in Loti's Holy Land trilogy

suggests that myth had indeed gone for good as the nineteenth century was drawing to a close. Loti tells us that myth and spirituality belong to a by-gone age and can no longer be experienced. Only artefacts and ruins are left to remind us of their existence.

We shall turn now to the writing of a twentieth century "myth-seeker", Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio. Le Clézio, who has travelled extensively to many of the remote corners of the world, can be seen as a postmodern exoticist, seeking an "elsewhere" amongst primitive cultures. The author explains his attraction to such cultures as a desire to live amongst the last free men. [39] Like Tournier, Le Clézio attempts to integrate into his writing a non-Western worldview, which contradicts the notion of time as linear progress and space as a container for human action. In Tournier's *Vendredi* and *La goutte d'or* (1986), as in the two novels by Le Clézio's which we shall examine here, *Désert* (1980) and *L'étoile errante* (1992), the introduction of an alternative worldview enriches the materialistic existence of Western society. The two authors evoke a sense of mythic time and space, which, although lost from the modern world, can be recuperated by the imagination. We shall turn now to Le Clézio's *Désert* and *L'étoile errante* in order to see how the space of the desert and that of Jerusalem function in these particular late twentieth century novels. [40]

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[39] Pierre Lhoste, *Conversations avec J.M.G Le Clézio* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1971) 109.

[40] Although Loti and Le Clézio, in their desert representations, are not depicting the same geographical area (*Le Désert* is set in the Sinai, *Désert* in the Sahara) it can be argued that the space of the desert is as much an imaginary space as a physical one in European imagination. What we are interested in here is the functioning of the desert as mythic space. Le Clézio shares with Loti a preference for desert landscape, as we see in the following extract from *Conversations*: "Je n'aime pas tellement la végétation. J'aime ce qui montre la présence d'un cataclysme ancien, les traces d'une vengeance ancienne, quelque chose qui montre que la terre a été comme la lune ou qu'elle va l'être, quelque chose qui montre que la vie n'est pas éternelle et que la Terre peut devenir squelette." Lhoste 83.

Désert

In many ways *Désert*, is the antithesis of Loti's *Le Désert*. Unlike Loti, Le Clézio uses the representation of desert space in order to re-enchant the world.[41] This desire for re-enchantment arises from a sense of the failure of modernity to fulfill human needs and expectations. The unprecedented slaughter during the wars of the twentieth century and the possibility of nuclear holocaust discredited, in the minds of many, the idea that rational, scientific thought led to human progress. Technological advances came to be viewed with greater suspicion. The latter decades of the twentieth century saw an increase in what might be called "irrational" currents of thought. Religious fundamentalism flourished. There was renewed interest in aboriginal cultures and spirituality, and greater credence given to the paranormal. In the last few decades the Western worldview has been influenced by "ecological" thinking, that is to say, not merely environmental concerns, but also a neo-romantic desire for renewed harmony with the natural world. Luc Ferry sees, in the ecological preoccupations of the postmodern era, a desire for a return to pre-modern times:

> Il se pourrait bien en effet que la séparation de l'homme et de la nature par laquelle l'humanisme moderne fut conduit à attribuer au premier seul la qualité de personne morale et juridique n'ait été qu'une parenthèse, en train de se refermer. [42]

Le Clézio's writing in general and *Désert* in particular share several features of this "ecological" mode of thought: the human characters are fleeting, evanescent, not cultural or psychological beings. The integration of the human and the environment is all important. The space of the desert is not a

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[41] This expression is used by Jean Onimus, who writes: " Dans son parti-pris de réenchanter le monde, de sacraliser la nature Le Clézio attache volontiers une conscience aux choses." 109.
[42] Luc Ferry, *Le nouvel ordre écologique*, (Paris: Grasset, 1992) 20.

container for human action, but rather a privileged space with which characters interact. Jean Onimus stresses this ecological perspective of Le Clézio's work as an aspect of postmodernism:

> Haïr le moderne est devenu le propre du postmoderne! On en arrive à désirer ne plus être homme, à fuir l'homme, à se réfugier dans l'animalité où l'on retrouve, croit-on, je ne sais quelle totalité perdue. (152)

Like Ferry, Onimus sees here the negative aspects of the ecological movement: its antihumanism and consequent abdication of moral responsibility. Onimus points out also the impossibility of attaining this lost harmony, which, he implies, never existed. He stresses the impossibility of Le Clézio's attempt to transcend culture and to reintegrate man and nature:

> Mais justement, il est impossible à un homme de s'attarder à contempler un chaos de détails en refusant de voir les ensembles [...] sans impliquer, par là même, quelque parti pris philosophique: soit une mise en question de sens, [...] soit un plaisir de communiquer avec tout ce qui existe [...] soit enfin une "fuite" de nature mystique. [43]

All of these aspects mentioned in the quotation above apply to Le Clézio's works in general. Le Clézio's "parti-pris philosophique" does indeed involve a questioning of meaning and a desire for communication on a mystic level. *Désert,* too, expresses the problematic of meaning on a thematic and narrative level. Characters and text lead a nomadic existence which never quite achieves resolution. [44] Certain passages of the novel describe the kind of

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[43] Onimus 199-200.

[44] In his article on Le Clézio as a modern exotic Bruno Thibault stresses this nomadic characteristic in relation to *Livre des fuites*: "Il est clair que le voyage de Hogan diffère du voyage romantique. Il s'agit non d'un pèlerinage dont le but et les étapes sont connus et marqués d'avance, mais d'une fuite, d'une dérive, d'une errance sans terme." " *Le Livre des fuites* de J.M.G Le Clézio et le problème du roman exotique moderne," *The French Review* 65 (February 1992) 429. This applies equally to *Désert* in which characters wander constantly throughout the novel with no precise destination. Thibault's remark concerning the journey whose goal and stages are mapped out in advance could describe Loti's journey through the desert to Jerusalem.

mystical or shamanistic experience associated with so-called primitive cultures. We know, of course, from Le Clézio's writings and interviews given by him, of the importance he places on such cultures. *Haï* in which Le Clézio declares "je suis un Indien", was written after the author's stay with the Indians of Panama. Jean-Xavier Ridon explores the influence of this culture on Le Clézio's perception of language:

> Le Clézio exprime le désir de retrouver une écriture qui puisse réintroduire l'être humain dans l'univers dont il est séparé; ce qu'il dit trouver chez les Indiens. Car pour ceux-ci le monde n'est pas un spectacle, la marge de l'observation n'existe pas. (63)

Le Clézio has often reiterated his desire to restore through writing the harmony destroyed by centuries of progress, to break down the barrier between signifier and signified, and thus to make language "real" in the same way that music or birdsong is. In an earlier work, *L'Inconnu sur la terre*, he expresses this notion of the power of language to restore lost harmony: "Les mots ne veulent pas détruire ce qu'il y a devant nos yeux. Ils répondent aux autres mots, aux vrais mots originels, qui sont dits par la voix du monde." (113) He also expresses the idea that, in modern, urbanized existence, language has been deformed, and has become a barrier to any real understanding of the world. In this respect it resembles the city, for both city and language "dressent un écran devant le monde."(158) [45] In *Désert* Le Clézio attempts to evoke, poetically, the sense of the desert, to make the space

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[45] In this respect Le Clézio's thought resembles that of Baudrillard who also laments that words have lost their power of evocation in a world dominated by market values: "le système a réussi, lentement mais inexorablement, à neutraliser la puissance symbolique de la parole." *Le miroir de la production* 154. Another social critic, theologian Jacques Ellul, writes also of the devaluation of the word in a world where image reigns supreme. *La parole humiliée* (Paris: Seuil, 1981) expresses the desire to reunite word and meaning through writing. Le Clézio, Baudrillard and Ellul are all "myth-seekers" of the twentieth century who express the same nostalgia for harmony, wholeness and meaning, all of which have been evacuated from the modern Western world. All express the possibility of an alternative existence accessible through language.

of the text correspond to the "real" space of the desert. It is, as the author well realizes, an impossibility to recreate in language the real experience of space,[46] but the result is a very beautiful text which often has a haunting, hypnotic quality, as in the following quotation which occurs near the end of the novel, evoking the limitless space and shimmering light of the desert:

> Devant eux, la terre très plate s'étendait comme la mer, scintillante de sel. Elle ondoyait, elle créait ses cités blanches aux murs magnifiques, aux coupoles qui éclataient comme des bulles. Le soleil brûlait leurs visages et leurs mains, la lumière creusait son vertige, quand les ombres des hommes sont pareilles à des puits sans fond. (410)

In *Désert*, just as in Loti's *Le Désert*, the time and space of the desert function in opposition to the time and space of modernity, for each author is, in his own way, anti-modern. Le Clézio, however, would seem to be seeking a compromise with the inevitability of modernity and not, as Jean-Yves Debreuille suggests, merely lamenting paradise lost:

> Le rêve saharien est, comme tous les rêves de Le Clézio, un rêve régressif: il ne déploie les suites dans le temps que pour mieux comprendre l'expérience première, celle précisément dont la pureté a été brisée par ce qui lui a succédé. Le mythe ne se construit pas comme une solution, mais comme un regret. [47]

In the author's representation of the categories of time and space we shall see how the text itself suggests a compromise between two worlds, the modern world of the city and the natural world of the desert.

In *Désert*, past and present are mingled through the interweaving of two stories: that of Nour, a young desert nomad, which takes place between

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[46] This desire to express the experience of the real is reminiscent of the discourse of deep ecologists. Such a desire is as paradoxical as Aldo Leopold's exhortation to "think like a mountain." *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Random House 1970) 137.

[47] Jean-Yves Debreuille, "Nature et cité dans *Désert*," Elena Real et Dolores Jimenez (eds.) *J.M.G Le Clézio. Actes du colloque international. Université de Valencia* (1992) 107.

1909 and 1912 during the final conquest of Morocco and that of Lalla, which, although no precise dates are given, apparently takes place in our own time. In the course of the text the relationship between the two is established as it transpires that Lalla is a descendant of Nour's people, "les hommes bleus", the last of the desert warriors. Through Lalla's mystical experiences with the person, or rather the perceived presence of that person whom she names Es Ser (the secret), the past is able to infiltrate the present.

The text evokes a sense of mythic timelessness through the use of circular narrative. This is the case in both of the stories. The opening and closing sentences of Nour's tale (which open and close the novel itself) consigns this episode in Saharan history to the realm of dream:

> Ils sont apparus, comme dans un rêve, au sommet de la dune, à demi cachés par la brume de sable que leurs pieds soulevaient. (7)
> [.....]
> Tournés vers le désert, ils faisaient leur prière sans paroles. Ils s'en allaient, comme dans un rêve, ils disparaissent. (411)

It might be possible to construe this ending as expressive of defeat or resignation, (Le Clézio's "rêve régressif" as Jean-Yves Debreuille calls it), but the whole novel, as well as Le Clézio's other works, affirms the value of the dream world which has the power to influence the world of lived experience. The fact that the experiences of Nour and the nomadic warriors are felt by Lalla confirms their continued presence. This transmission of experience makes Le Clézio's desert representation the antithesis of Loti's vision of a dead, soul-less world.

Lalla's tale also is enclosed in a circular narrative, beginning and ending on the dunes at the desert's edge. Again the possibility of dream is

evoked as Lalla returns from her stay in Marseilles: "c'est comme si rien ne s'était passé. C'est comme si la jeune femme n'avait pas cessé de dormir." (389) The expressions "peut-être" and"comme si" proliferate throughout this novel. We have the impression of a text as shifting as the desert sand. Agnès Clavareau sees the use of "comme si" as a link between two worlds: "le 'hic et nunc' que vit la jeune fille et son passé imaginaire d'enfant du désert, dont la cosmicité envahit son être intérieur jusqu'au vertige." [48] Contrary to Clavareau's assertion that the "comme si" appears only in Lalla's story, the expression does in fact appear in Nour's tale (though not to the same extent) and functions in the same way, signifying a shift from the lived material world to a cosmic level, as in the scene describing the gathering of the nomads for prayer: "La lumière des braseros et la lueur blanche de la lune éclairaient leurs corps vacillants, comme si des éclairs sautaient sans cesse au milieu des nuages de poussière." (65)

Thus the "comme si" which returns Lalla from Marseilles to the dunes evokes a sense of changing dimensions. This return involves a new beginning as well, since it is here on the dunes that Lalla gives birth to her daughter in much the same cirumstances as those in which she herself was born to her mother, Hawa. This birth suggests the possibility of a new beginning. Lalla's story is left open-ended as, having given birth to her daughter, she waits patiently under the fig tree on the dunes for the inevitable arrival of someone from the Cité:

> un jeune garçon pêcheur de crabes, une vieille
> à la chasse au bois mort, ou bien une petite fille
> qui aime simplement se promener sur les dunes
> pour regarder les oiseaux de mer. Ici, il finit toujours
> par venir quelqu'un, et l'ombre du figuier est bien

48 Agnès Clavarareau, "Lecture mythique de *Désert* de J.M.G Le Clézio," Georges Cesbron (ed.) *Mythe-Rite-Symbole* (Angers: Presses universitares d'Angers, 1985) 398.

douce et fraîche. (396)

We see here circularity operating on both a thematic and formal level: After her city experience in France, Lalla has returned to the very fig-tree beneath which she listened to stories of the wonders of the city told by Naman the fisherman. Also the text itself has come back to its starting point, ready to begin the story again. The effect of this circular narration is to create a sense of mythic timelessness existing alongside the time of modernity.

In *Désert*, two forms of timelessness are evoked: the accelerated pace of the modern world alters the concept of time, as we see in the episode where Nour witnesses the battle of Agadir in 1912: "Est-ce que le temps existe quand quelques minutes suffisent pour tuer mille hommes, mille chevaux?" (408) Yet there is also the sense of timelessness which is a feature of nomadic desert life. The ceaseless wanderings of Nour's people cause them to lose all notion of time. They cannot know if they have been on the move for days, months or years. Human time is meaningless in the desert:

> C'était un pays hors du temps, loin de l'histoire des hommes, peut-être, un pays où plus rien ne pouvait apparaître ou mourir, comme s'il était déjà séparé des autres pays, au sommet de l'existence terrestre. (11)

This description of the desert suggests the same sense of a place lying outside of time which exists in Loti's work. In Loti's novels, however, the timelessness which he identifies as a feature of the desert and of the Islamic world, is portrayed as the timelessness of the cemetery where time has run down and stopped, whereas Le Clézio's desert seems much more a living entity, a space of freedom. In this respect Le Clézio's representation of time recalls some of Mircea Eliade's ideas on *mythical* as opposed to *historical* time. According to Eliade "archaic" or "traditional" peoples, whilst living

with a sense of historical time, are able to gain access through their myths and rituals to primordial time, that is the time of the gods, the time of origin. This primordial time exists alongside historical time and, in Eliade's thinking, it can be accessible also to modern man through art and literature. Eliade sees in modern art a "manifestation of the human need to overcome a time that has become unreal in order to recover or make available a time that is fresh, whole and meaningful."[49] In *Désert* and *Etoile errante* both historical and mythical time are represented, the narrative moving between the two. Le Clézio, like Eliade, sees writing as a means of access to that primordial time which has the power to revitalize human existence and to satisfy the "nostalgia for a lost mystical solidarity with nature [which] still haunts Western man." [50]

In the timelessness of the desert characters lead a nomadic existence. Underlying this existence is the quest for the ideal, mythic space. Whereas Loti's spiritual quest follows a linear path to a specific goal, Le Clézio's desert inhabitants wander in search of a place which is more imaginary than real. Nomadism is a feature of both *Désert* and *Etoile errante* both on the level of content and of narrative structure. These novels deal with two nomadic peoples, the tribes of the Sahara and the dispersed Jewish people, both of whom fall victim to persecution because there is no space which they can call their own. These people are excluded from territory and are condemned to an existence of continual displacement because of a reallocation of space by the forces of modernity (war, colonialism, urbanization). The narrative too is nomadic in that it passes in *Désert* from Nour's story to that of Lalla, from the turn of the century to recent times. In *Etoile errante*, the narrative passes in

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[49] Quoted in Wesley A. Kort, *Modern Fiction and Human Time* (Tampa: Florida UP, 1985) 69.
[50] Mircea Eliade, "Cultural Fashions and History of Religions." Quoted in Kort 68.

Esther's story from third to first person and also to the voice of Nejma, the young Palestinian girl forced by the war to live in a refugee camp. However, the wandering of narrative and content is not aimless. In both novels the quest for some form of promised land underlies the nomadic existence.

The nomadic tribes in *Désert* find themselves victims of one of the unfortunate conditions of modernity, that of shrinking space. European armies are encroaching on the space of the desert, driving the nomadic tribes from their traditional lands: "Les horizons se referment sur le peuple de Smara, ils enserrent les derniers nomades." (358) Le Clézio introduces into this novel two different concepts of space. European notions of ownership (the enclosing of space) are contrasted with the nomad philosophy (limitless space): "La terre qu'ils défendaient ne leur appartenait pas, ni à personne, parce qu'elle était seulement l'espace libre de leur regard, un don de Dieu. (357) Since Europeans first began colonizing the world these two philosophies have come into conflict causing extreme suffering to colonized peoples for many of whom the concept of land ownership did not exist. The free space of the desert continues to shrink for Nour's people as they are caught between the armies and the sea:

> Les soldats des Chrétiens avaient lentement refermé leur mur sur les hommes libres du désert [...] Que voulaient-ils, ces étrangers? Ils voulaient la terre tout entière, ils n'auraient de cesse qu'ils ne l'aient dévorée toute, cela était sûr. (399)

Désert resembles much of the ecological and post-colonial discourse of the second part of the twentieth century in that the nomadic relationship to the land is considered far superior to that of the European colonizers. The nomads are represented as an unobtrusive presence on the earth's surface, whereas the European forces destroy the space which they occupy.

Throughout Nour's story is a sense of the inevitable defeat of the desert warriors and their sheikh by the invincible forces of modernity. However, total annihilation is avoided by the intervention of the mythic in the person of the spiritual leader of the "guerriers bleus," sheikh Ma el Aïnine. After his death and burial, the desert sands quickly erase all physical trace of the revered sheikh: "peut-être que le grand cheikh était retourné vers son vrai domaine, perdu dans le sable du désert, emporté par le vent." (404) Nour senses the presence (le regard) of the sheikh in the same way that Lalla will later feel the gaze of Es Ser:

> Peut-être qu'il demandait aux hommes de le rejoindre, là où il était, mêlé à la terre grise, dispersé dans le vent, devenu poussière.....Nour s'endormait, emporté par le regard immortel, sans bouger, sans rêver. (405)

In *Désert* it is clear that there can by no physical resistance to the European invaders and to the modernization of the desert space which inevitably follows, but resistance is possible on a mental and spiritual level. The incorporation of the sheikh's body into the desert sands and its dispersal by the wind symbolise the integration of the nomadic people with the desert space. This relationship of human and space constitutes a form of resistance. The space of opposition to modernity is not the real space of the desert but rather the desert as mythical space.

The mythic quality of the desert is enhanced in *Désert* by the presence within the desert space of a promised land. This image of the promised land, in the form of a holy city, occurs in both *Désert* and *Jérusalem*. In *Désert* the far away cities of North Africa and Europe which the old fisherman Naman describes to Lalla (95-96) resemble the idealized descriptions of Jerusalem in *Etoile errante*, (150-151,333) and like Jerusalem, the city of Taroudant, which

functions as promised land for Nour's people, is also represented as a mirage: "Irréelle, comme suspendue dans la lumière du soleil, la ville semblait attendre les hommes du désert." (234-5) The depiction of these cities evokes a sense of unfolding space as the eye of the imagination is directed towards the tantalizing possibility of the promised land. In Naman's description the cities on the other side of the sea are, "des villes blanches...avec toutes ces allées de palmiers, ces jardins qui vont jusqu'en haut des collines....ces avenues si longues qu'on n'en aperçoit pas la fin." (95-96)

As in Loti's *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem*, these wonderful cities hold promise only from a distance. None of these places fulfills the dream of promised land and in Lalla's case the city of Marseilles proves to be an almost diabolic inversion of the heavenly city described by Naman the fisherman. Lalla's aimless wandering in Marseilles echoes the movements of the desert nomads in Nour's story. The Hartani, child of the desert, has in the city a counterpart in another kind of nomad, Radicz, the young beggar of gypsy origin, whom Lalla befriends. The sense of shrinking space which affects Nour and his people in the desert is echoed in Lalla's experience in Marseilles, where she moves within the space of the city as in a nightmarish labyrinth and is assailed by the horrible sensation of being swept into a dark funnel:

> Lalla descend jusqu'au bout de l'avenue, puis elle remonte une autre avenue, une autre encore. Il y a toujours les lumières, et le bruit des hommes et de leurs moteurs rugit sans cesse. Alors, tout d'un coup, la peur revient, l'angoisse, comme si tous les bruits de pneus et de pas traçaient de grands cercles concentriques sur les bords d'un gigantesque entonnoir. (291)

The labyrinthine space of the city is the antithesis of the vast, open desert

space.

Lalla's existence moves between two poles, the desert and the city. These two poles are in turn represented by two characters, the Hartani and Radicz. The polarization of space is particularly stressed in this novel. The space and light of the desert and the motif of flight which runs throughout are contrasted with the black, foreboding buildings of the city, and with the sense of fear which Lalla feels as she has the impression of being drawn into a black hole. The city has its own form of nomadism in the transient population amongst whom Lalla must keep moving "pour ne pas tomber, pour ne pas être piétinée par les autres." (290) In her job as cleaner in one of the shabby hotels in a poor neighborhood of Marseilles she encounters, briefly, members of the transient population of Marseilles, mainly immigrants whose very existence seems uncertain: "parce qu'ils ne laissent pas de trace de leur passage, comme s'ils n'étaient que des ombres, des fantômes." (301) These people function as the double of the evanescent desert nomads in Nour's story; but whereas desert nomadism is synonymous with a life of liberty, nomadism in the city is represented as an anguished wandering or fleeing from the ever present threat of annihilation. This contrast is perhaps most apparent in two death scenes. Death in the city is a form of zombification which comes at the end of a life of exploitation for the North African immigrant workers:

> Ils creusent des trous dans la terre caillouteuse ils brisent leurs mains et leur tête, rendus fous par les marteaux pneumatiques. Ils ont faim, ils ont peur, ils sont glacés par la solitude et par le vide. Et quand ils s'arrêtent, il y a la mort qui monte autour d'eux [....] les croque-morts aux yeux méchants les effacent, les éteignent, font disparaître leur corps, remplacent leur visage par un masque de cire, leurs mains par des gants qui sortent de leurs habits vides. (307)

This description [51] contrasts with the death scene of the sheikh in *Désert* where Ma el Aïnine described as "couché dans son manteau blanc, si léger qu'il semble flotter au-dessus de la terre" (381) and who, after death, becomes "dispersé dans le vent." (404)

Lalla must find a compromise between the city and the desert, between modernity and myth, for she cannot exist solely in either sphere, as her attempt to flee with the Hartani shows. The Hartani is a pure child of nature, a somewhat mythical creature. We note that the Hartani does not age. He is illiterate (as is Lalla). He is also mute but has a deep understanding of the natural world which he is able to communicate to Lalla without the use of words. As several critics have observed, in the works of Le Clézio, communication without words is valued above language. [52] The Hartani is able to live in the desert, something which Lalla is not physically capable of doing. Fleeing modernity (in the form of the man in the grey suit who wants to "buy" her for a wife with his useless gifts), she attempts to go with the Hartani to the "centre" of the desert. The section entitled "Le Bonheur," ends with a moment of cosmic happiness as the two lie together beneath the stars: "Ils ne voient plus la terre à présent. Les deux enfants serrés l'un contre l'autre voyagent en plein ciel." (207) However this state of paradise cannot be sustained and Lalla, dying of heat and thirst, is recuperated by the Red Cross

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51 This description is reminiscent of an episode in Tournier's *La goutte d'or* in which the Berber immigrant, Idriss, is being used as model for a series of mannequins. His body and face are engulfed in liquid plastic. Michel Tournier, *La goutte d'or* (Paris: Gallimard 1986) 187. Like the immigrant workers in Le Clézio's novel, Idriss has no status as a real person in French society. In *La goutte d'or* also the space of the desert functions as oppositional space to the oppressive city life of Paris.

52 "Le Clézio travaille la matière verbale pour en dégager une musique et faire en sorte que son langage devienne semblable aux langages que murmurent l'eau et le vent, les insectes et les oiseaux." Yves-Alain Favre, "Le Clézio: poète de la lumière," *J.M.G Le Clézio. Actes du Colloque international* 303.
Jacqueline Michel explores the privileged place of silence in Le Clézio's work in *Une mise en récit du silence* (Paris: Corti, 1986).

and sent to the opposite pole, the city, Marseilles. Lalla is equally incapable of adapting to city life, a life which fills her with anguish and a sense of the void, in spite of her success and rise to fame as a model. She survives thanks to a mystical force which grows within her mind as the child of the Hartani is growing in her body. This force is "le regard" which has been transmitted from the "guerrier bleu", Es Ser, through Nour, to the Hartani and to Lalla. "Le regard" in Le Clézio's novels is much more than the sense of sight. It is a powerful, liberating force, which enables those blessed with it to transcend the world of their daily existence and to see the world from a totally different perspective. In Lalla's case the gaze can demolish the city which holds its inhabitants prisoner:

> Il n'y a plus ces villes sans espoir, ces villes d'abîmes, ...où les rues sont des pièges, où les maisons sont des tombes..... Maintenant, autour de Lalla Hawa, il y a une étendue sans fin de poussière et de pierres blanches, une étendue vivante de sable et de sel, et les vagues des dunes. C'est comme autrefois, au bout du sentier à chèvres, là où tout semblait s'arrêter, comme si on était au bout de la terre, au pied du ciel, au seuil du vent. C'est comme quand elle a senti pour la première fois le regard d'Es Ser. (334)

Lalla, like most of Le Clézio's characters, has no autonomy. She is a medium through whom the gaze of Es Ser operates, bringing to the city the space of the desert. [53] In this way a compromise is effected between the space of the desert and that of the city, between mythic space and the space of modernity. At the end of the novel, Lalla's return to the dunes at the desert's edge, yet close to the bidonville can be seen as a form of compromise. In this way Nour's story

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53 Again there is a striking resemblance between *Désert* and *La goutte d'or*. In the latter novel also, the space of the desert serves as oppositional space to the oppressive space of the city. Idriss rediscovers the desert through the study of calligraphy and is thus able to gain access to "le temps démersuré où il avait vécu." (199) This repossession of the desert through writing permits him to escape from, "la misère du passé, l'angoisse de l'avenir et la tyrannie des autres hommes." (202)

is incorporated into hers. The mythical, unattainable past way of life can coexist with the inevitability of modernity. The compromise between the two opens the ways to new future possibilities. This is suggested by the open-ended way in which the novel closes.

This integration of real and mythic space is a feature of many of Le Clézio's novels, including *Etoile errante,* which recounts the exodus of Jewish people from Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War. Le Clézio has a particular interest in displaced peoples (desert nomads, Jews), for these people have a relationship to the space of the world which mirrors the author's propensity for endless travel.

Etoile errante.

Etoile errante (1992), like *Désert,* proposes an integration of mythic and real space. This novel, one of whose major themes is the quest for Jerusalem, integrates both myth and political/historical reality. Whereas Jerusalem in Loti's work is represented as having spiritual significance only in the long ago past (that is to say existing only as unattainable desire), Jerusalem for the characters in Le Clézio's novel exists both as myth and reality. Jerusalem plays a vital role in their quest for a space and identity of their own. This novel depicts the plight of the multitudes of displaced and persecuted peoples wandering the world in search of a home after the Second World War. Many of Le Clézio's novels represent the condition of nomadism (often an enforced nomadism) which has become a feature of contemporary life, particularly since the Second World War, as populations have been forced through war or economic conditions to uproot themselves and move on. It is also possible to see nomadism as existing in the Western world in peace - time, since we are

very much, in David Harvey's words, "a society of transients with a nostalgia for common values." [54] Underlying nomadism, be it physical or textual, as in the case of Poulin's translator (*Les Grandes Marées*), is always the quest for a place to rest from wandering, a quest for meaning. In *Etoile errante*, Esther and her people are seeking a time and space of their own. Often in the novel they are caught in a limbo where turning back is an impossibility and the road ahead is blocked. It is at such moments that the power of myth and language comes into play.

One such limbo is Festiona, the Italian village where Esther and her mother stay, after having fled France and come through the mountain passes into Italy. Even the church clock has stopped at four o'clock and an atmosphere of stillness and silence exists throughout the place:

> A Festiona il n'y avait pas de temps, pas de mouvement, il n'y avait que les maisons grises aux toits de lauzes où traînait la fumée, les jardins silencieux, la brume du matin que le soleil faisait fondre, et qui revenait l'après-midi, qui envahissait la grande vallée. (119)

Later, as Esther and her mother wait for the train to take them to the coast where they will board a boat for Israel, time once more seems to have stopped, condemning Esther and her compatriots to the traditional role of the wandering Jew for whom immobility and rest are impossible:

> Peut-être qu'il faudra passer toute la nuit sur les quais à attendre, mais quelle importance? Le temps a cessé d'exister pour nous. Nous voyageons, nous sommes dehors depuis si longtemps, dans un monde où il n'y a plus de temps. (143)

For those seeking a homeland, constantly on the move, time has become meaningless, since they are excluded from the history and daily life of the

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[54] Harvey 288.

countries which they have inhabited up to this point and must spend their lives wandering or waiting. "Je hais les voyages, je hais le temps" declares Esther, in a moment of weariness and despair; but here as in several places in the course of the novel she finds comfort in the thought of Jerusalem: "C'est la vie avant la destruction qui est Jérusalem." (154) Jerusalem represents another form of timelessness, a positive form, that is, a return to the place of origin of the Jewish people, a reintegration into mythic time. It is most often through language - prayers said in Hebrew or words from Genesis - that Esther is able to gain access to Jerusalem's timelessness, for the Hebrew language, "la langue qu'avaient parlé Adam et Eve au paradis," (197) links Esther to the origins of her people. In a detention centre, waiting for permission to leave France, Esther listens to the voices and prayers of the older men (since she has grown up in a communist family without religion, prayer is a new experience for her) and discovers the power of words over time and space:

> Maintenant il me semblait que la distance qui nous séparait de la grande ville sainte n'existait plus, comme si cette même lune qui glissait dans le ciel éclairait Jérusalem, les maisons, les jardin d'oliviers, les dômes et les minarets. Le temps non plus n'existait plus. C'était le même ciel qu'autrefois, quand Moïse attendait dans la maison de Pharaon, ou quand Abraham rêvait comment avaient été faits le soleil et la lune [.....] Ici, dans cette prison de l'Arsenal, je savais que nous étions une partie de ce temps-là, et cela me faisait frissonner de peur et me faisait battre le coeur, comme quand j'écoutais les paroles du livre. (189)

Here Esther, whilst living the reality of Europe in the 1940s, is able to live also in the time of her ancestors. This not only serves to make her life as refugee more bearable (as in Eliade's notion of the benefit of primordial time to modern man) but also enables her to establish an identity. The process of

identity acquisition is another of the novel's themes. At the beginning of the book Esther is known as Hélène, but gradually reassumes her Jewish identity. However, Jerusalem can never be fully attained. In this respect, Le Clézio's representation of Jerusalem does bear some resemblance to Loti's in that it is a place which shines from a distance. Its image is more attractive than its reality. But, whereas for Loti the disappointment of the actual Jerusalem overshadows any possibility of finding the hoped-for spiritual experience, for the characters in *Etoile errante,* the myth of Jerusalem never loses its power.

Esther and the fleeing Jewish people find comfort in the myth of Jerusalem much more so than in its reality. As in *Désert* there is the sense of shrinking space as the characters are forced to flee from country to country and often find themselves in confined spaces, as when Esther and her mother spend time in a single room in Festiona or hiding in Uncle Simon Ruben's small Paris apartment. The Jewish people emigrating from France are concealed beneath the deck of the boat taking them to Israel. In some instances, space shrinks until it disappears completely, its occupants suffering the same fate. Nowhere is this more poignantly expressed than in the episode where a group of Jewish refugees is captured by the Nazis at Borgo San Dalmazzo. They believe they have finally reached safety after crossing to Italy from France and are thinking of the promised land:

> Ils parlaient de leur terre, d'une ferme, d'une vallée. Ils parlaient de la ville de lumière, étincelante avec ses dômes et ses minarets, là où se trouvait la fondation du peuple juif. Peut-être qu'il rêvaient qu'ils étaient déjà arrivés, et que les dômes et les tours de Valdieri étaient aux portes de Jérusalem. (124)

They are never to see Jerusalem, however, for they find themselves caught between the German soldiers in front of them and the mountains behind

them. They are herded into the confined, windowless space of one of the station buildings: "On n'était plus nulle part." (127) Space has shrunk around them to such an extent that they are left in limbo, soon to be annihilated. We are told that "le train s'était ébranlé pour ce voyage sans but" (127). Then follows a list of cities on the route North until "tous ces noms et tous ces visages [...] s'effaçaient, comme s'ils avaient été soeurs et frères arrachés de la mémoire d'Esther." (127) As in *Désert*, in this novel people are saved from total annihilation by being integrated into another life, in this case that of Esther. Like Lalla, Esther is a medium through whom the thoughts and feeling of others can be transmitted. This is evident in the episode which takes place after Esther's arrival in Israel. As Mount Carmel exerts a fascination over Esther she feels communion (through the sense of sight) with those whose lives have been lost:

> Esther ne le voyait pas avec ses yeux, mais avec les yeux de tous ceux qui en avaient rêvé, tous ceux dont les yeux s'étaient éteints sur cette espérance, les yeux des enfants perdus dans la vallée de la Stura, emmenés dans les wagons sans fenêtres. (301)

Both Lalla and Esther, at certain moments, are given the power of seeing with the eyes of others. Analogous to the power of the gaze is that of the word. In *Etoile errante* prayers and holy words enable Esther to attain a sense of communication without words, similar to that which exists between Lalla and the Hartani. For Le Clézio wordless communication permits a profound and meaningful relationship between the human and the natural world. This relationship has been severed by the corruption of language. [55] The power of the word is revealed to Esther when she first visits the synagogue. The

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55 Le Clézio has often expressed this idea in interviews and in his writings. For example in *L'inconnu sur la terre* he writes: "Par le langage, l'homme s'est fait le plus solitaire des êtres du monde, puisqu'il s'est exclu du silence." (38)

Hebrew language is foreign to Esther whose family has so far chosen not to follow the Jewish faith and so, on the level of communication, the words spoken are meaningless, but, nonetheless, they give rise to Esther's first mystic experience:

> Elle cherchait à lire sur leurs lèvres les mots
> étranges, dans cette langue si belle, qui parlait
> au fond d'elle-même, comme si les syllabes
> réveillaient des souvenirs. Le vertige montait
> en elle dans cette grotte pleine de mystère [...]
> Esther pouvait franchir le temps et les montagnes
> comme l'oiseau noir que lui montrait son père,
> jusque de l'autre côté des mers, là où naissait
> la lumière, jusqu'à Eretzraël. (81-82)

The words of the Hebrew prayer enable Esther to have access to a past which she has not personally lived, the past of her people. They enable her to transcend both time and space. Here, as in *Désert,* the motif of flight evokes both liberty and power. In several other instances in this text there is expressed the notion of words enabling the emigrants to reach Jerusalem despite the physical and political obstacles which stand in the way. In Le Clézio's novels the gaze and language function in a way that is the opposite of their role in Loti's *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem.* In Loti's two novels the gaze, in an attempt to impose meaning, orders the landscape into forms and patterns which language depicts as lifeless. In Le Clézio's writing the gaze does not emanate from the subject, but acts through the subject, integrating the latter into the surrounding space and permitting the subject to participate in mythic time.

In *Etoile errante* the mythical Jerusalem, evoked through the power of words, does not resemble the real city. Just like the heavenly cities portrayed in *Désert,* Jerusalem also has a dark side. Jerusalem, as first seen by Esther and

her mother Elizabeth, is far from radiant. It lies beneath a dark, threatening cloud: "Une grande fumée noire montait du centre, s'élargissait formant un nuage menaçant où commençait la nuit." (213) This is reminiscent of Nour's experience in *Désert*, when he stands outside the walls of Taroudant. This city, last hope of refuge, assumes a threatening aspect: "Comme si ce n'étaient pas des hommes qui vivaient là , mais des esprits surnaturels." (237) A similar image appears also in *Etoile errante* in the part of the text devoted to Nejma's story where the devastation caused by the Arab/ Jewish conflict evokes apocalyptic scenes: "Quand tous seraient morts et que le sable du désert aurait recouvert leurs os, les Djenoune reviendraient dans leur palais sur le jardin du paradis." (271)

What is implied in these images of ideal cities being occupied by evil spirits, is that paradise is inaccessible and that the nomadism must continue until a resolution can be found. Sometimes it seems that no resolution is possible. In *Etoile errante*, it is Nejma, the young Palestinian girl who, displaced from her home by the arrival of the Jewish people seeking their promised land, is condemned to perpetual wandering, thus assuming the role of the wanderer traditionally attributed to the Jew. Her story ends with these words: "Le soleil brillait pour tous. La route n'avait pas de fin." (284) Although Nejma's story ends here and we do not encounter her again in the text, she is not obliterated from the novel, since Esther considers her as a double. The two stories, that of Esther and that of Nejma, are inextricably linked (as are those of Nour and Lalla in *Désert*). Esther feels that she will not be complete until she finds again Nejma whom she met only once "sur la route de Siloé, près de Jérusalem, née d'un nuage de poussière, disparue dans un autre nuage de poussière, tandis que les camions nous emmenaient vers

la ville sainte." (307) During the fleeting moment of their meeting, an important exchange takes place as each girl writes her name in the notebook carried by Nejma (a notebook carried for the purpose of keeping account of the sufferings of her people). This notebook, symbolising the power of language over time and space, holds a prominent place in Esther's thought as she imagines the longed-for meeting with Nejma, her alter ego: "Nous échangerions nos cahiers pour abolir le temps, pour éteindre les souffrances et la brûlure des morts." (308)

It is in Esther's story where a state of resolution is reached, though in Le Clézio's novels no resolution is ever definite since his novels are open-ended, looking towards a future that must always be uncertain. Esther has to come to terms with the past in order to find her place in the world: "J'ai peu de temps. Si je ne trouve pas où est le mal, j'aurai perdu ma vie et ma vérité. Je continuerai à être errante." (326) This involves a return to France and a reliving of her father's death in order that she can lay to rest the sense of waiting for him to appear which has accompanied her throughout much of her life. The return also involves a reflection on the significance of the Jerusalem myth. In Nice, Esther finds herself once more in limbo in the aptly named Hotel Soledad (solitude): "Il me semble que je suis n'importe où, partout, nulle part." (322-3) She is surrounded by disasters which, in her mind, are connected - her mother is dying, forest fires are raging around Nice, Beirut is burning. (324) At the place where her father was killed by the S.S. Esther is reminded of his descriptions of Jerusalem:

> C'était comme ça qu'il parlait de Jérusalem, de la ville lumière, comme d'un nuage ou un mirage au-dessus de la terre nouvelle. Où est cette ville? Existe-t-elle vraiment? (333)

Esther comes to the realization that the Jerusalem her father so much wanted

to see was not the real city, but a place of the imagination. Esther herself, by reliving the scene of her father's death, has found the mythic Jerusalem:

> Maintenant il me semble que la ville de lumière, Jérusalem, celle que mon père voulait voir, c'était là-haut, sur cette pente d'herbes, tous ces dômes célestes, et les minarets qui relient le monde terrestre aux nuages. (335)

This final image of Jerusalem in the novel suggests an integration of real and mythic space. Esther has found Jerusalem, not in war-torn Israel, but on the mountain slopes of her childhood, in the place where her father died. The novel closes on an image of Esther scattering her mother's ashes over the ocean and feeling, at last, a great sense of peace as she contemplates the future. (340) As in *Désert,* the circular narrative of *Etoile errante* produces a sense of resolution, but not a sense of closure, for it implies a multitude of possible directions in Esther's future.

A critique of modernity underlies the writings of Loti and Le Clézio which we have examined here. Both authors express the desire for an "elsewhere," a space beyond the reach of the civilization of their time. Both turn towards the East, to the desert and Jerusalem, and also towards the past in their search. In Loti's world, only Islam is able to provide the timeless alternative to modern life which is so unbearable to him. It is the Islamic world which offers the greatest peace and tranquillity, not the death and decay which is Jerusalem. Le Clézio evokes the desert and Jerusalem in his novels, not so much as real places, but as mythic space which have the power to enrich the industrialised, urbanised world of the late twentieth century. Just as Tournier's *Vendredi* is a rewriting of the Robinson Crusoe story which

privileges the primitive worldview, so Le Clézio's *Désert* and *Etoile errante* are rewritings of two maor episodes in European history, the colonization of North Africa and the exodus of the Jewish people from Europe, which privilege a spiritual, non-materialistic view of the world. In the post-colonial world of Le Clézio there is an acceptance of the disappearance of myth from the lived, material world, but an attempt to recover it in imagination and text.

The continuing presence of the desert and Jerusalem in texts of the late twentieth-century indicate that these places still hold power as mythic space in the Western imagination. In European thought and writing they constitute one pole of attraction. The other is the West, the potential paradise of America to which we shall proceed in the following chapter.

Chapter 3.

Metamorphoses of the American Dream.

Since the discovery of the New World in the fifteenth century the American continent has held the status of mythic space in the European imagination. Like Jerusalem it is real but imaginary at the same time and like the holy city, America also stands as a place of hope and salvation in opposition to European space. [1]

Various studies of French representations of America during the centuries since the discovery of the New World show a multiplicity of European perceptions ranging from great admiration to outright hostility. [2] America transcends its geographical boundaries to become, in the European imagination, mythic space fluctuating between promised land and evil empire depending on the political climate in Europe and on the predjudices of individual authors. According to Kornel Huvos:

> L'image du Nouveau Monde dans la littérature française demeurera, à travers les siècles un mirage américain, éminemment subjectif, projection d'aspirations, d'espoirs, d'angoisses et d'aversions, d'utopies politiqueset de visions philosophiques sur l'écran de la réalité d'outre-Atlantique: idéalisée par une nostalgique admiration ou blâmée au caprice des

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1 For Naïm Kattan the American adventure is an extension of the desire, often expressed in Western culture, for Jerusalem and the promised land: "L'aventure américaine m'est apparue alors comme une tentative consciente, délibérée de concrétiser une parabole biblique. L'appel au départ, l'attente, le désert, l'exil et l'investissement d'une terre promise. Terre promise qui se réduit à une terre de promesse, une promesse repoussée à plus tard, remise, jamais tenue." *La mémoire et la promesse* (Montreal: HMH,1978) 8.

2 European perceptions of America are reflected in the changing attitudes towards Christopher Columbus, who is the symbol of America in European thought. Jean-Paul Duvids observes: "Colomb peu à peu, perd son identité. Il devient tour à tour le symbole, voire même l'allégorie, de l'audace de l'aventure humaine, de l'expansion du christianisme et plus récemment de la mauvaise conscience du colonialisme européen. Les images portent à la fois la marque esthétique et la marque idéologique de leur temps."
Jean-Paul Duvids, "La découverte d'un nouveau monde. Images d'une invention. Invention d'une image," in Jean-Louis Augé (dir.), *Image du Nouveau Monde en France* (Paris: Editions de la Martinière, 1995) 80.

> rancunes et des préjugés, l'Amérique se verra tantôt représenter comme un Eldorado de béatitude arcadique, tantôt affubler de la peau de bouc émissaire responsable des infortunes du vieux continent. (17-18)[3]

Huvos examines French attitudes from the early part of the century to the 1960s showing how different authors, (Maritain, Duhamel, Sartre and De Beauvoir) project a positive or negative image of America according to the climate in Europe at the time in which they were writing and to their own individual vision of the world. A constant in European representations of America, whether favorable or otherwise, is a fascination with the vast space of the continent. This fascination has endured to the present day, as we shall see in the novels of Yves Berger. In the novels which we shall study here, whether written in the nineteenth or twentieth century, America provides both hope and disillusionment. The space of America offers the promise of a new beginning, a better society, but America also epitomizes the power of money and the forces of modernization which enclose the world and eliminate all alternative space.

America has an important role in the novels of Jules Verne. As Jean Chesneaux points out, twenty-three of Verne's sixty-four novels take place wholly or in part in the United Sates: "Les Etats-Unis, pour lui, se trouvaient comme à la frontière entre les mondes connus et les mondes inconnus.... C'était les Etats-Unis qui se rapprochaient le mieux du modèle de développement dont il rêvait pour l'humanité." [4] As we have seen in the case of *L'île mystérieuse* the ideal American for Verne is the practical man of science who can transform the forces of nature into energy for human consumption. Although Verne never lost his admiration for scientific

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[3] Kornel Huvos. *Cinq mirages américains* (Paris: Didier, 1972)

[4] Chesneaux, *Jules Verne: une lecture politique* 136.

discoveries, [5] the growing materialism of Western society and the emphasis on financial power led to a disillusionment with the American model. *L'île à hélice,* as we have seen, expresses this scepticism towards American society of the 1890s. Similarly in the two novels we shall examine here, *Les cinq cent millions de la Bégum* (1879) and *Le testament d'un excentrique* (1899), Verne expresses, along with a fascination for the space and scientific prowess of America, a sceptical attitude towards a land where money reigns supreme.

Les cinq cents millions de la Bégum.

Although *Les cinq cents millions* is set in the United States, the novel contains no recognizable features of the American landscape. The function of the state of Oregon, as depicted by Verne, is to provide an empty space, a theatre for the transposition of the Franco-Prussian conflict to American soil:

> Les lieux et les temps sont changés. Il y a cinq années que l'héritage de la Bégum est aux mains de ses deux héritiers, et la scène est transportée maintenant aux Etats-Unis, au sud de l'Oregon, à dix lieues du littoral du Pacifique. Là s'étend un district vague encore, mal délimité entre les deux puissances limitrophes, et qui forme comme une sorte de suisse américaine. (59)

The expression "suisse américaine" which Verne also uses in *Le testament d'un excentrique* suggests an extreme Eurocentric attitude, denying the specificity of American space and culture. America, as represented here, is an imaginary place, ideal for the founding of France-Ville, a model city, "comme les Saint-Simoniens et les autres courants du socialisme utopique avaient rêvé d'en fonder, en Afrique ou en Amérique." [6]

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5 In a letter to Marie Belloc written in 1894 Verne declares: " J'estime que j'ai de la chance d'être né dans une période de découvertes remarquables, et peut-être plus encore d'inventions merveilleuses." Quoted in Daniel Compère, *Jules Verne. Parcours d'une oeuvre* (Amiens: Encrage, 1996) 47.

6 Jean Chesneaux, *Jules Verne: une lecture politique* (Paris: Maspero, 1982) 62.

Unlike the community of *L'île mystérieuse,* France-Ville will not be carved out from the natural world, but will be built, at great speed, thanks to the huge fortune inherited by Dr Sarrasin. The Doctor's projections for his model city resemble the European vision of America itself. It will be a city of health and well-being in which will be welcomed honest and hard-working families from overcrowded countries. There will be a place also for those fleeing persecution. The latter will bring to France-Ville their intelligence and moral wealth. (37) The welcome will not, however, be extended to all potential immigrants. Later in the novel, after the building of the city by Chinese laborers under the direction of European engineers, the former are denied access to France-Ville:

> Le produit des travaux était déposé toutes les semaines, en présence des délégués, à la grande Banque de San Francisco, et chaque coolie devait s'engager, en le touchant, à ne plus revenir. Précaution indispensable pour se débarrasser d'une population jaune qui n'aurait pas manqué de modifier d'une manière assez fâcheuse le type et le génie de la cité nouvelle. Les fondateurs s'étant d'ailleurs réservé le droit d'accorder ou de refuser le permis de séjour, l'application de la mesure a été relativement aisée. (147)

From a present-day perspective the above quotation reads as an ironical comment on American attitudes towards immigrants, but can equally well be read as another instance of Verne's racism. What is necessary to the survival of France-Ville, as to that of the actual American utopic communities of the nineteenth century, is homogeneity, hence the expulsion of immigrants whose presence brings difference.

In the lengthy description of France-Ville (150-159) the picture which emerges is not that of a wonderful, utopic community, but rather that of a

dull American suburb. A strict building code and numerous other regulations ensure that France-Ville complies with Dr Sarrasin's precepts of hygiene:

> Chaque maison sera isolée dans un lot de terrain planté d'arbres, de gazon et de fleurs. Elle sera affectée à une seule famille. Aucune maison n'aura plus de deux étages; l'air et la lumière ne doivent pas être accaparés par les uns au détriment des autres. (150)

Not only is France-Ville governed by strict codes relating to health and hygiene, but also its population must conform to a work ethic. We learn that only productive citizens are allowed residence. "Les existences oisives n'y seront pas tolérées." (153) As Jean Chesneaux points out, the description of France-Ville's dystopian rival, Stahlstadt, is much more powerful than that of France-Ville. [7] A fully realized utopia leaves little for the imagination to explore.

The banality of this utopia stems perhaps from Verne's disillusionment with America at the time of writing. Although the space of America still exerts a certain fascination, it cannot be a truly mythic space because it is controlled by money. Money is the foundation of both France-Ville and Stahlstadt. The evil Herr Schultze, who sits like a minotaur at the centre of his labyrinthine city, is destroyed by his own science, but Stahlstadt itself succumbs to economic forces in the "Babel moderne" of the San Francisco Stock Exchange. The recuperation of Stahlstadt by the forces of good at the end of the novel seems as banal as the description of utopian France-Ville: "On croit trop en ce monde qu'il n'y a que profit à tirer de l'anéantissement d'une force rivale...il faut au contraire sauver de cet immense naufrage tout ce qui peut servir au bien de l'humanité." (234) The "naufrage" is not some great cataclysm, as in the earlier novels, but financial

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[7] Jules Verne: *Une lecture politique* 62.

ruin. The phrase "tout ce qui peut servir au bien de l'humanité" suggests, by its vagueness, that the author is at a loss as to what direction the good of humanity might take in a world where all seems drawn into the web of capitalist society. Verne's view of America as vastness of space dominated by financial forces is expressed with greater irony in *Le testament d'un excentrique* (1899), a novel which often seems to prefigure late twentieth-century representations of America, such as Baudrillard's *Amérique* with its emphasis on perpetual motion.

Le testament d'un excentrique.

In *Le testament* a weathy eccentric leaves a will stating that his vast fortune will be left to the winner of a board game. The participants have been chosen by drawing names from a list of the inhabitants of Chicago. The extent of William J. Hypperbone's eccentricity becomes apparent when we learn that the board on which the participants are to play is the entire United States of America, the various states forming the squares of the board. The millionaire's lawyer will throw the dice which determine where the players will move. This trivialisation of the space of America, its reduction to a children's board game, reflects Verne's greater disillusionment with that country at the end of the century. "L'espace politique américain est désormais désarticulé, éclaté en fragments épars - signe très net de sa délégitimation idéologique aux yeux de Jules Verne." [8]

Although *Le testament* contains many descriptions which testify to Verne's admiration for the grand-scale natural beauties of America such as the mighty Mississippi, Yellowstone National Park or the towering

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8 Jean Chesneaux, "Jules Verne et la modernité" in *Modernités de Jules Verne* 62.

mountains of Colorado, the main emphasis in the novel is on the speed with which the continent can be crossed thanks to its network of railways: "A cette époque, le réseau des voies ferrés sillonnait la surface entière du territoire et en combinant les horaires et les graphiques, on pouvait voyager très rapidement." (I 86) This is modern America in which no place is inaccessible. Even the most remote corners of the continent have been brought within the web of the railway system, so that any traveller who is capable of coordinating numerous railway timetables can cross the country in a few days.

Le testament often reads like a series of tourist brochures imparting a wealth of geographical and historical details about the places through which the participants travel. Most of the players themselves, however, are oblivious to these sights, since they are too fully engaged in the pursuit of the Hypperbone fortune to notice the wonders around them. References to this obliviousness are frequent throughout the novel. Tom Crabbe, the boxer, travelling to Tennessee " ne s'inquiétait guère d'observer le pays qu'il traversait." (I 120) We are told that the disagreeable Mr and Mrs Titbury could have visited the most beautiful and interesting areas of Maine - Mount Khatadin or the birthplace of Longfellow in Portland - had they not been so preoccupied with winning the game:

> Mais, de demander ces déplacements à deux mollusques arrachés de leur banc natal, et transportés à neuf cent milles de là, c'êut été peine inutile. Non! ils ne quitteraient Calais ni un jour, ni une heure. Ils resteraient en tête-à-tête, supputant leurs chances, maudissant d'instinct leurs partenaires, après avoir réglé cent fois déjà l'emploi de leur nouvelle fortune, si le hasard les rendait trois cents fois millionnaires. (I 141)

In spite of a century, or almost, which separates *Le testament* from the writings of Berger and Baudrillard, the three European authors express the

same notion, that is to say, Americans, obsessed by money, are unworthy of America. It would seem that only Europeans are able to appreciate the beauties of this vast space. Even the character types admired by Verne, the artist and the reporter, cannot free themselves from the power of money. Although Max Réal, the artist, and Harris T. Kymbale, the reporter, agree to participate in the game for the sake of seeing and portraying America, not for the love of money, they cannot help being drawn into the financial web as more and more Americans bet on the outcome of the match. At Niagara Kymbale is warned against wasting time: "Vous appartenez à ceux qui ont parié pour vous." (I 159) Similarly Max Réal is deprived of the full enjoyment of Yellowstone: "Mais pouvait-il oublier qu'en lui l'artiste se doublait d'un partenaire, qu'il ne s'appartenait pas." (II 10) These Americans are far removed from the independant, capable individuals of Verne's earlier novels. In an America covered by a web of railroads, an America which epitomizes economic modernity, there is no use for a Cyrus Smith. Nature has been conquered and divided into scenic areas for tourist consumption. The whole space of America can be covered in a few days by individuals on a quest, not for utopia, but for money.

Although *Le testament* reveals Verne's disappointment with America, the representation of the space of America in the novel still expresses a sense of awe at the vast dimensions of the continent and wonder at the technology (the railways) which allow movement within this space.

This emphasis on America as a space which allows unlimited movement is apparent also in the works of the late twentieth century with which this chapter is concerned. We shall look at the significance of America in the postmodern era in two French novels, Yves Berger's *Le Fou*

d'Amérique (1976) and *Les Matins du Nouveau Monde* (1987) as well as the representation of America in one Quebec novel, Jacques Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* (1984). As well as these novels we shall consider the mythic representation of America in Jean Baudrillard's essay, *Amérique*. In the works in question, America can be seen to function as mythic space in much the same way as do the island, the desert or Jerusalem in that it stands in opposition to the space and time of Europe and assumes a timeless quality. America, just as much as the desert, is a space of quest and nomadism. The quest which takes place in the space of America, particularly in the novels of the twentieth century, is much more a quest for meaning than the search for an ideal place.

What is noticeably absent in the novels studied here is the representation of American *people*. In this respect they express a colonialist attitude to America, that is to say America exists to gratify the desires of those who travel within it. The writers of our own era, who are intent on "discovering America" in a very personal way, choose to ignore the contemporary reality of America and its social and political institutions in order to privilege the notions of space and time over the psychology or material presence of America's population. This can be seen as part of the myth of America, or we might say that America, like the other mythic spaces we have studied, forms the object of a discourse in the European imagination. Within this discourse can be found certain topoi which recur in varying degrees in the works to be discussed in this chapter: America is an area of boundless space waiting to be discovered, a place which holds out the possibility of the promised land and a new beginning. Unlike Europe, America is a space which invites movement. The promise of America can be

found only through a nomadic existence, which usually involves movement towards the West. These topoi have existed in writings on America for many centuries, but the late twentieth century has a particular way of expressing them. As Naïm Kattan says:

> La promesse s'est métamorphosée en promesses. On n'a pas construit des temples et des chateaux mais des autoroutes pour partir, pour chercher dans le mouvement incessant un oubli, une consolation. [9]

Kattan captures here the sense of America expressed by both Yves Berger and Jacques Poulin, which is that the great American dream, the myth of America, has been fragmented and scattered. Characters who still search for this dream must undertake a meandering quest which will lead them through museums, historic sites and texts, where history has been preserved, in order to attempt some reconstitution of the myth as consolation for their loss of the original.

In the "American" novels of both Poulin and Berger, the reconstruction of the myth involves the incorporation of Amerindian characters or history. This feature can be seen as a late twentieth century rousseauistic neo-romanticism, a belief that a resurrection of primitive cultures might counteract the damage done to the earth by rampant technological progress. [10] However, in these novels, as in those of Le Clézio, we find the notion of a past that is irretrievably lost, that may be conjured up by the power of words from time to time to provide an alternative vision to

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9 Kattan 56.

10 David Harvey points out the illusory nature of the supposedly superior environmental practices of indigenous peoples: "Much contemporary 'ecologically conscious' rhetoric pays far too much attention to what indigenous groups *say* without looking at what they *do*..... Indigenous or precapitalist practices are not... necessarily superior or inferior to our own just because such groups possess discourses that avow respect for nature rather than the modern 'Promethean' attitude of domination or mastery." *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* 189.

the time and space of contemporary life, but a vision which remains powerless nonetheless to alter the course of history or even to stop the degeneration of the human body and its inevitable demise. This idea of degeneration and decline is a preoccupation in many of Poulin's novels, and it amounts to a veritable obsession in the writing of Berger. The notion of degeneration may be a symptom of fin de siècle sensibility at the end of the twentieth century as it was at the end of the nineteenth or, on the other hand, it may be linked to the age and experience of the writers in question. All the authors to be discussed here - Baudrillard, Berger, Poulin - are no longer young. Perhaps it is the fact that they have lived through the traumatic events and dashed hopes of the twentieth century, seeing youthful ideals vanish and the corporate mentality triumph, which leads them to represent the myth of America as unattainable desire or, in the case of Baudrillard, as the ultimate fake.

The parameters for the exploration of the mythic space of America in the twentieth century, as in previous chapters will be time, space and language. In all these writings, the space and time of America stand in opposition to those of Europe or Quebec. For Berger and Poulin the vast space of America permits a quest which involves movement back in time as the history of America is explored and reinterpreted. For Baudrillard America is the "utopie réalisée" in the eternal present of the hyperreal. He also equates it with pre-modern, primitive society. In all of these works it is possible to detect a notion of America which has persisted for many centuries, that is, America as a land where new beginnings are possible. It is surprising perhaps that such a dream persists in the cynical postmodern age and even more surprising that for many writers, the dream continues even though the

experience of American reality contradicts it.[11] Although hopes of real renewal prove false, the myth of America persists in language, in words and names which retain the power to evoke a time and space outside of contemporary existence.

For Yves Berger especially, America is an almost magical land for which the author professes a profound admiration in spite of its many faults. In the trilogy consisting of *Le Sud* (1962), *Le Fou d'Amérique* (1976) and *Les Matins du Nouveau Monde* (1987), the narrator's "love affair" with and the personal discovery of America are described. The influence of the American myth is so strong that it permeates even the later "ecological" novels, *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* (1994) and *Le monde après la pluie* (1997) which will be studied in the next chapter concerning the natural paradise. It is indeed difficult when discussing the works of Berger to separate the image of America from that of the natural paradise, for the two are closely intertwined, as they have in fact been in the writings of Western society ever since Columbus expressed the belief that he had discovered the site of the Garden of Eden at the mouth of the Orinoco River.[12] We shall begin, however, with

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[11] Another striking example of this is Michel Tournier's *Journal de Voyage au Canada* (Paris: Laffont, 1984) - for Europeans Canada can be encompassed within the idea of America - which juxtaposes the reality of a journey across the continent undertaken in 1972 and the Canada of the imagination. Tournier states in his preface:

> Comme tous les enfants d'autrefois, je n'avais pas besoin de la révolution écologique pour aimer passionnément le Canada. Plus encore que l'arbre, le lac, la neige et une faune admirable, c'était pour moi la terre d'un certain commencement, ou recommencement. Paradis terrestre, oui, mais non par ses fleurs et ses fruits, non par un climat mol et délicieux. Paradis terrestre parce que *première* terre habitée par le *premier* homme. Le trappeur dans sa cabane de rondins avec son fusil, ses pièges et sa poêle à frire, subvenant seul à tous ses besoins, durement, dangereusement, tel était l'Adam originel, patient, ingénieux et athlétique que nous voulions tous être - plutôt que celui de la Bible déjà encombré d'un père autoritaire. (9)

In spite of the fact that the author encounters more of the banality of urban life than raw nature he still writes at the end of "la réussite de notre découverte du Canada." (174) It is apparent that for Tournier, as well as for the authors we shall study here, the reality of America (or Canada) is less important than its power of evocation.

[12] *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires* 409.

a study of *Le Fou d'Amérique* in which the love affair with America is explicitly expressed as well as the impossibility of America as paradise.

Le Fou d'Amérique.

"En 1945 j'allais sur mes dix ans et rien ne me distinguant des autres rien ne donnait à penser que je vivrais extra-ordinairement, quand le mal d'amour fondit sur moi." (11) These opening lines of *Le Fou d'Amérique* reflect the autobiographical nature of the novel as well as its central theme, the obsession with America which haunts the author/narrator. The novel is, as Michel Gueldry says: "une autobiographie intellectuelle et sentimentale"[13] in which the narrator, a doctor, has the opportunity to visit the United States and to get to know the object of his desire (not named as such until several pages into the novel) "en chair et en os" (17) rather than through books and photographs. The equation of America with the female object of desire is maintained throughout the novel. The map of America is seen as a feminine form by the narrator: "Je t'ai trouvée femme dans les cartes, avec tes grandes surfaces de ventre..." (22). Early in the novel he meets Luronne (evoking l'Huronne), a history professor of mixed French and American parentage who will serve as guide and initiator in the narrator's personal discovery of America, an exploration which more often takes place in the mind rather than in the space of the continent and occurs in the form of visions inspired by Luronne's narration. Incursions into the real space of America form interludes in the narration and for the most part serve to illustrate the loss of the mythic America which the narrator is hoping to see recreated via Luronne' s words. The narrator is met with the sight of death and decay when

13 Gueldry, Michel. "Yves Berger: de la quête poétique à la disparition du roman." *The French Review.* 68:4, March 1995 615.

he seeks out the fabulous flora and fauna of America which has lived in his imagination since childhood. The trees of the virgin forest are dying (56) as are the birds in the Louisiana sanctuary (146).

For the narrator of *Le Fou d'Amérique*, as for many of his compatriots, the appeal of the American continent lies in the vastness of its space in comparison to the restrictiveness of France: "où comme la mouche prisonnière d'une pièce, je me heurte aux murs des Alpes et des Pyrénées." (12) It is, however, impossible for the narrator to make contact with the space of America, since there always exists a screen between the observer and the space; a screen formed by the vast quantity of images, texts, photographs, films which inhabit the mind and which alter the perspective of the observer. When confronted with America itself (which cannot of course exist as an entity, but only as places visited), the narrator is invariably disappointed by the experience. In all the descriptions of the journeys undertaken to different parts of the country, there is a pervasive sense of loss, death, and environmental destruction.

From the very outset of the stay in America, this disappointment is evident. Having landed in New York the narrator wishes to visit Brooklyn, a name for him evocative of Amerindian heritage. All magical correspondence between the place and the name has vanished:

> De plus sages - de plus courts - diront que pas n'était besoin d'arpenter Brooklyn pour connaître que rien ne subsiste de la piste indienne quatre siècles plus tôt et en fait de piste ou de ses restes je me suis retrouvé avec les seuls mots qui la disent, que quelqu'un avait prononcés il y a longtemps et qu'on avait repris, après lui, pour que lèvent les visions et pour l'enfièvrement de la tête. (24)

There is here the same nostalgia for meaning, the same desire to reunite

word and world, which we find in the writings of Le Clézio. The place itself has lost its mythic quality but its name retains the power to evoke images of a lost era. Similarly, a Manhattan boat tour contains the same glimpse of myth and reality: Ellis Island which, as the narrator reflects, has represented the entrance to the promised land for generations of immigrants appears from the deck of the tour boat as "une masse quelconque de briques rouges noyée dans la verdure." (30) There is in these lines an acceptance of the disappearance of the American myth sought by the narrator, as if he did not really expect to find traces of it on the boat tour where he is a tourist among other tourists. Later episodes, where the narrator displays less detachment, lead to a sense of despair at the discrepancy between imagination and reality.

It is when the narrator is actively searching for the myth that it proves to be most elusive. What he and Luronne are attempting to do is to discover America, to go back to its origins: " On essayait de surprendre, en train de se faire, au moment où elle opère, l'américanisation en quelque sorte sur le vif." (46-47) When the search is undertaken in museums and galleries it meets with some success. The study of paintings by unknown artists gives the narrator the feeling of approaching his goal: "En quelque sorte sans les hommes, elle venait à nous sans tache, issue de personne, sans la tare, sans le péché, une Amérique des origines du monde." (47) However, a long anticipated journey to the ancient forest fills him with despair as he finds there, not the wild and wonderful place experienced in his readings of the books of Jack London and James Oliver Curwood, but "la nature malade et cuite." (60) As he struggles to come to terms with the gap between reality and imagination, he finds the failure is one of language: "je compris que je ne savais plus dire la forêt américaine, à présent que je l'avais vue alors que

naguère encore après l'avoir lue, je l'évoquais d'abondance." (60) The actual experience of the space of America leaves the narrator with a sense of emptiness. The mythic America he is seeking pales in comparison to the America of which he has read. The textual space is, for him, far more valid than the real one, as if the "real"America were but a shadow of the ideal America existing in the narrator's mind. Throughout the novel precedence is given to the visions evoked by language as if to say that only through words can any discovery of America be made.

The episode of the forest signifies the awakening of an ecological conscience within the narrator, (an antidote to the despair experienced at the degeneration of the ancient forest) and an awareness of nature's need for revenge for the devastation caused by centuries of human exploitation. This empathy for suffering nature - "faites qu'on éprouve encore la résistance, la présence, la vie, voire les maladies de tout ce que l'on fauche, tue, abat, hache, déterrre et scie, à l'ordinaire" (63) - is a means of entering another mythic realm, that of the lost natural paradise, which is closely associated in the works of Berger with the lost paradise of America.[14]

Ironically for the narrator, whose quest for the mythic America is an attempt to transcend mortality (his own and that of the many lost tribes) he is confronted in all his travels by images of death. The first such experience is in the forest with its sickly vegetation and hovering buzzards. This experience is repeated in the bird cemetery in Louisiana where thousands of birds gather along the banks of the Atchfalaya to die, watched avidly by the waiting vultures, which for the narrator symbolize his own mortality ever

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[14] This ecological thinking recalls Baudrillard's affirmation that only a malevolent ecology is capable of counteracting the destruction wrought by twentieth century technological advance. *l'Illusion de la fin* (Paris: Gallilée, 1992) 116.

present in his thoughts: "Pourquoi faut-il qu'il y ait toujours des oiseaux de proie sur mon bonheur, mes aventures en Amérique, les charognards de Louisiane après les busards de Connecticut?" (144) Once again reality has failed to correspond to the image. In the vast quantity of books on the flora and fauna of America read by the narrator and Luronne, the wonderful drawings of Audubon show birds vibrantly alive whereas in lived experience they are dying. The myth of America is being eroded in the narrator's mind: "J'avais perdu les oiseaux, après la forêt, toute une partie de mon grand livre d'images arrachée, en Amérique même, restait Colomb." (146) In spite of the weight of evidence brought against him by all the anti-colonialists and post-colonialists of the twentieth century, Columbus still shines like a beacon of hope in the mind of the narrator, a hope that somehow the course of history can be diverted.

Just as the Louisiana expedition ended in disappointment and images of death, so the next expedition on board a raft down the Colorado river leads to an awareness of the ecological devastation which has occured in our century. As always the narrator undertakes not just a journey in space, but a journey back through time as well as he contemplates rock formations "évocateurs du monde pré-colombien que je porte en moi" (226), formations which he envies for their longevity: " cette souffrance en moi de connaître que je n'atteindrais pas fût-ce à la moitié de ces pierres." (228) The majesty and grandeur of the Colorado is, however, powerless against the march of human progress, as the two travellers discover upon learning that cities and factories have appropriated the waters of this great river which "dans le sable et la boue, meurt par manque d'eau." (229) To make matters worse this death of a great river is stripped of tragedy by the derisory use to which its waters have

been put. The narrator lists the trivial objects which need electricity supplied by the river: "les petits assassins du grand Colorado, le climatiseur, le séchoir à cheveux, la télévision, la radio, la guitare électrique, le fer à repasser...." (230) [15] As with all the incursions into the space of America, doubt is cast upon the possibility of ever finding the mythic America which the narrator has carried in his mind since childhood.

If reality is filled with disillusionment, the only resort is language. America can only be discovered, or recovered, by means of narration. In fact, most of *Le fou d'Amérique* is devoted to Luronne's story of America which she recounts over a period of several months, interspersed with the occasional journeys across the continent which we have studied above. This narration is presented as a ritual, preceded by "purification ceremonies." First the narrator breaks all ties with France, divorcing his wife and deciding to stay definitively in America. Then, with Luronne, he visits places with Indian names which seem to him especially significant. Throughout this episode there is a sense of the narrator playing a game as he prepares for the ritual telling of America, during which the choice of the correct words with which to begin is all important: "Les mots qui sont à l'origine? J'imaginais des cérémonies pour nous les rendre favorables. A la réflexion, il apparaissait que tout, d'évidence, tournait autour des mots." (86-87) The purpose of this ritualized narration is to stop the passage of time, an obsession which runs throughout Berger's work. [16] The quest for America, as for any other mythic space, is a search for a place where the laws which govern the world of lived experience are suspended, a shelter from the

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15 Berger's words echo Loti's lament concerning the time in which he lived, "notre siècle mesquin et impie."

16 This obsession is one of the main themes of *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve*.

ravages of time and the vicissitudes of modern life. The narrator of *Le Fou d'Amérique* wishes above all to unravel time, to go back to an era (which he often refers to as the Neolithic) in order to alter history from its evil course. The narrator's personal fear of death is closely intertwined with the notion of the history of the world. He feels that if only he can find where history went wrong and change its course, he himself will be able to live eternally. The discovery of America through language offers just such a possibility:

> Puisque les mots qui disent l'Amérique sont pour moi toujours neufs! Jamais encore entendus. Puisque, dans la nuit, ce sont des phares qui projettent, éclairent les plus belles images du monde, où je suis bien, où je doute que je mourrai. (76)

This project of Berger's narrator is reminiscent of an observation by Jean Baudrillard on our state of mind at the approach of the millenium. Baudrillard asks:

> Sommes-nous voués, dans le vain espoir de ne pas persévérer dans la destruction actuelle... à la mélancolie rétrospective de tout revivre pour tout corriger, de tout revivre pour l'élucider... Sommes-nous tenus de citer tous les événements passés à comparaître, de tout reconstruire en termes de procès? Un délire de procès s'est emparé de nous ces temps derniers, en même temps qu'un délire de responsabilité, justement quand celle-ci devient de plus en plus insaisissable. [17]

Baudrillard views the contemporary era as one of retrospection, and indeed there is little evidence in our Western culture of an optimistic attitude towards the future. As 1999 drew to a close there was much discussion in the media of impending disaster which might take the form of ecological catastrophe or the dreaded Y2K bug. This anxiety is accompanied by nostalgia for what is perceived as a more wholesome past. Paradoxically postmodern culture uses all the technical prowess of the postmodern era to reconstruct

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17 *L'illusion* 25.

pieces of this past for human consumption. Recreations of frontier towns and ghost towns can be found in many places of North America. Meticulously detailed representations of various epochs of human and pre-human history are displayed in Western museums. [18]

Berger is attempting a similar reconstruction, in words, in *Le Fou d'Amérique*. The greatest part of the novel is devoted to Luronne's narration of American history, particularly the history of the Amerindian tribes whose life on the American continent remained largely unchanged in the centuries between the crossing of the ice bridge over what is now the Bering Strait and the arrival of the Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although the narrator listening to Luronne's story experiences in his mind "visions" of the people and events being described by Luronne, the reader has much more the impression of watching an IMAX film than participating in a shamanistic experience. This effect is due to the abundance of detail and the use of erudite language and statistics. (We learn, for instance, that the Paleo-Indians crossed the isthmus in the year 38,000 BC (91)). This use of language is very deliberate on the part of the author and serves to create a distance between the narration and its reception, just as there is a distance between the mythic past of America to which the narrator aspires and the present of lived experience which carries always a sense of loss. Such is the case of the West, symbolic of new life in a promised land:

Go West! C'est ce que je dis à Luronne et je lui raconte

[18] For Umberto Eco, such representations are a peculiarly American obsession: "There is a constant in the average American imagination and taste, for which the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication. It dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition." *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego and New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986) 6. Eco's essay was first published in 1976. In the years which have passed since then, the obsession with exact replicas seems just as much a European obsession as an American one, if we are to judge by the proliferation of historical reconstructions available to tourists throughout Western Europe.

> que, enfant, j'aimais les Anciens parce qu'ils plaçaient le paradis terrestre à l'ouest, au delà des Gorgones et des îles Fortunées. Puis je m'assombris à penser qu'il n'y a plus d'ouest aujourd'hui, plus de terres à découvrir, plus d'espoir, à moins que Luronne.... (152)

Here, as often throughout the novel, the narrator expresses resignation, an acceptance that the settled, industrialized contemporary world has lost its mythic space and yet, as the suspension points in the above quotation indicate, he still holds onto the faint hope that Luronne's narration can somehow stop the world in its tracks and change the course of history, thereby preventing the destruction caused by European colonization. He hopes that the hero of his boyhood, Christopher Columbus, might not, by his obsession with finding gold, bring evil into this new world which seemed at first so much like paradise. (166) All depends on Luronne's narration:

> Oui, et si on ne fait rien, si l'Histoire va de ce mauvais pas, sur cette mauvaise lancée, si Luronne ne la détourne pas, toute l'histoire des rapports entre les peuples, les hommes est là, dès 1492, dont on peut souffrir, mourir encore aussi bien en 1976. (171)

Such a hope is, of course, as the narrator is well aware, doomed to disappointment. The last idyllic image of America with which Luronne ends her story is the joyful arrival of Lewis and Clark at the mouth of the Columbia and the declaration: "L'Amérique est découverte." (314) She wishes to end her story on this note of achievement. The move towards the West is established in the narrator's imagination, as in that of Western civilization, as a quest for the promised land, a land that Lewis and Clark have now reached. The narrator refuses, however, to end on this note of gladness, knowing it to be false, and questions Luronne who simply dismisses the whole story of America with the words: "il n'y a plus d'inconnu en Amérique" and adding,

to remind the narrator that this has been, after all, just a tale told by a history professor: " d'ailleurs, je n'ai pas étudié plus loin que Lewis et Clark." (314) The spoken words of a story (or written words of a novel) may evoke powerful images but are powerless to bring about a change in history. The narrator finds some intervals of solace in books, such as in the one containing the drawings of Audubon but realizes that " on ne peut rien avec des oiseaux contre des hommes et l'Histoire, après cet intermède, reprend le cours de ses forfaits." (316) The myth of America of which the narrator catches glimpses in books cannot be found in America lived and experienced, for the lived America is that of colonists and their descendants, whereas the narrator's (and Berger's) ideal America is that of wild nature and the Amerindians who were a part of that nature before the arrival of the Europeans. The narrator's visit to an Indian reservation confirms the disappearance of the long cherished myth, for the Indian village appears banal with its signs advertising hot dogs and soft drinks, and, worst of all, its souvenir shop with its soulless objects: "Et ces objets petits, miniaturisés n'étaient pas insignifiants et lamentables par leur taille, mais parce qu'on sentait, avec l'absence totale d'âme et du Grand Esprit, la façon et le froid des machines dont l'Indien, qui meurt depuis cinq siècles achève de mourir." (274) What the narrator is experiencing here is that "nostalgia for nostalgia, for the grand older extinct questions of origin and telos" which Fredric Jameson sees as symptomatic of the postmodern condition. [19] After the failure to find the myth of America in what he expected to be its last human refuge, the Indian reservation, the narrator turns towards the remaining fragments of nature: "Le rêve s'était réfugié là, dans les sumacs-vinaigriers et les plaines à giguères, noires,

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19 Jameson 156.

malingres, criant misère. Tout ce qui restait de la forêt d'Amérique." (274-5) This indicates the direction which will be taken in two of Berger's later novels, *La pierre et le saguaro* (1990) and *L'Attrapeur d'ombres* (1992), both of which are constructed around the theme of the wild landscapes of the American West. Michel Gueldry explores this transition from history to nature in Berger's work:

> Il doit trouver une autre incarnation de la perfection, une réalité vraiment immuable, c'est-à-dire, non plus l'Histoire, avec ses paradis contingents, mais la Nature elle-même, américaine de tout temps, avant et après tous les avatars humains .... les descriptions s'élargissent en visons cosmiques où la nostalgie de l'Eden est remplacée par la célébration des âges géologiques, et où l'humain est totalement éclipsé par le végétal et le minéral. [20]

The failure of Luronne's narration to change history represents a failure of America itself to live up to its promise. When the narrator says: "Pourquoi et comment elle avait échoué, alors que je l'aime tant?" (318), he is speaking as much of the country as of Luronne. The New World has repeated the errors of the old. The retelling of the story has changed nothing leaving the narrator at the end of the novel with an even greater sense of loss - "les Indiens ravagés, les grands animaux abattus, la forêt d'Amérique déracinée." (318) His only recourse is to return to France "seul à jamais car désormais je n'aurais plus besoin de personne." (321)

This breaking free from Luronne and from America as historical narration indicates the direction which will be taken in the next volume of the trilogy, *Les Matins du Nouveau Monde*, in which the narrator, a young

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[20] Gueldry 621. This turning away from human history towards towards pre-human remains is perceived by Baudrillard as a facet of postmodern culture which wishes to preserve all traces of the past: "Si la modernité avait déjà suscité l'exploration anthropologique, la postmodernité, elle, a suscité un véritable engouement néo- et paléolithique. L'extraction des vestiges est devenue une entreprise industrielle. *L'illusion* 108.

boy living in Avignon during the German occupation, uses fragments of the myth of America as a shield and refuge from the fears and deprivations which fill his daily life. [21]

Les Matins du Nouveau Monde.

In this novel we meet again many of the characters and scenes from *Le Fou d'Amérique*: Christopher Columbus, the Amerindians, the ancient forest. The reader has the impression of witnessing the resurrection of people and places doomed to failure or destruction in the earlier novel. For example, Christopher Columbus, who failed to change history in *Le Fou*, departs from his historical role in *Les Matins* and is the subject of a special privileged relationship with the narrator. As befits the closing declaration of *Le Fou*, "désormais je n'aurais plus besoin de personne" (321), there will be no intermediary in this novel, the narrator interacting directly with the characters in American history and fiction which he most admires, Christopher Columbus being the first of these. In the opening scene of the novel, the possibility of America as promised land is established. The young narrator informs Columbus, who has paid him a visit before leaving on his great voyage, of the importance of his discovery, explaining that the land which the explorer will reach is not the long sought after Indies, but in fact an entirely new world:

> Grand Amiral, vous avez refait le monde, vous mais c'est en le découvrant..... après vous, grâce à vous et au celebret que vous accordez à tous les fous d'Amérique, cette humanité qui rêve depuis des siècles - et il m'arrive de penser qu'elle en rêvait dans le temps d'avant le temps - d'un paradis perdu

[21] Since *Les matins du nouveau monde* is based on Yves Berger's own childhood memories there is no clear distinction between narrator and author.

mais retrouvé en Amérique devenue terre promise. (15)

As in *Le Fou*, America's function in this novel is that of mythic space, the potential promised land. Once again the narrator is turning for hope and consolation to a promised land which he knows to have failed its promise. Throughout the novel there is emphasis on what has failed, what has been lost. Various American topoi, all potential paradises, figure in the narrator's consciousness as havens from the reality of lived experience. As the German army moves into the "zone libre" and the narrator suffers the loss, by death or forced absence, of all but one of the members of his family, he lives more and more in a textual world, seeking in his mother's collection of books images of America which might act as a buffer against disaster and death. Fictional American characters become "la grande armée litanique et américaine qui attend toujours aux avant-postes de mon esprit, le pénétrant par effractions, glissades ou pour l'amour que je leur porte et pour le besoin que j'ai d'eux" (25). Political reality and imagination meet in the hope that this wonderful mythic country which the boy discovers through texts will come to the rescue of France. "Quand donc les Américains viendront-ils nous libérer?" (224) However, the myth is privileged over the actual political situation, since references to the war going on in Europe are few compared to the numerous visions of America constructed from the books of Fenimore Cooper, peopled by characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*. The narrator chooses the textual world over the real one, situating himself inside each text, as when enraptured by Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* he makes himself at home in Tara where he wishes to stop time by rereading the same pages:

> Seulement relire et revivre et je reviens dans le livre en arrière, les pages me portant, ramenant dans un

> mouvement de flux et de reflux qui est peut-être la lenteur, la douceur du monde que le paradis a choisies. Rester là, ne pas franchir les bornes, qui sont les pages du livre et une géographie, du paradis en Georgie _ *Autant en emporte le vent* incomparable, que j'aime tant depuis si longtemps, depuis ma première lecture de lui, où je retourne toujours et que je redécouvre, à chaque fois, le même dans son éternité paradisiaque et sudiste. (111)

The above quotation expresses the obsession which underlies all of Berger's work - putting an end to the passage of time. As we have seen in *Le fou d'Amérique* the narrator holds out the hope that America will be a timeless space, a place where the course of history can be halted and death indefinitely postponed. In *Les Matins* , however, there is a much greater consciousness of language and text as if to say that paradise can exist only in language and that the ideal place exists only in the pages of a book. The narrator is very aware of the importance of language and the fact that his visions of mythic America are word constructions.

Each one of these carefully constructed visions in the boy's mind ends in demise, (an indication perhaps that his own country cannot survive.) The South, ("terre de naissance et de renaissance permanentes"109) which he had been hoping against all odds, would be victorious in the Civil War, is defeated; the Amerindians are forced into insignificance; the rich flora and fauna of the American continent are threatened with extinction: "l'Indien en deuil, la forêt en deuil, l'oiseau endeuillé, le monde en danger." (60) As the narrator progresses through the story of *Gone with the Wind* the powerful image of America is destroyed:

> Puis j'ai regardé se déchirer la toile du paradis et *Autant en emporte le vent* devenir, après la chronique du bonheur en Georgie, la chronique du malheur et de la déchéance du Sud, Scarlett se

> mettre aux affaires, réussir, choisir de collaborer avec l'ennemi qui, chez elle comme chez nous en Avignon, avait surgi d'un Nord barbare et je me rappelle m'être dit que c'était peut-être là le destin du Nouveau Monde que de mal tourner, c'est-à-dire tourner à la ressemblance de l'Ancien, où le paradis n'existe plus depuis longtemps. (113-114)

To the reader this identification of the Republican cause with Hitler's armies is shocking. As Michel Gueldry points out, Berger tends to avoid the issue of slavery on which the economy of the south is founded.[22] In the author's mythic world, however, the identification is quite logical, for both the Republicans and the German forces come from the North, " où, apprends-je, pullulent les usines, les commerces, les banques." (64) They owe their victory to superior technology, to the machine culture which Berger, in all his works (the America trilogy as well as the later ecological novels), represents as the antithesis of paradise. Again America has failed to live up to its promise. This failure is due to human nature which cannot avoid the Fall and can be attributed also to the inexorable progress of time. Time destroys every paradise constructed by the narrator.

The realization, brought about by the reading of *Gone with the Wind*, that change is inevitable and that time cannot be halted, marks a transition in the life of the young narrator: "Conscient que le livre change, je me rappelle soudain cette phrase, au début, sur la cadence des jours anciens qui est perdue et je sens, ému, le temps qui passe, pour la première fois de ma vie." (114)

Time is a crucial element in this as in all of Berger's novels through

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22 Gueldry, "Trois romanciers français et l'Amérique ou comment, l'oubliant, l'on se forge une âme," *Revue Francophone* VIII:1 40. In the novel itself most references to slavery occur in the context of the narrator's reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Certainly there is pity expressed for the plight of the slaves, but more important to the narrator is their function as part of the American myth which protects him from reality: The slaves are part of " ...la grande armée litanique et américaine." (25)

which runs a nostalgia for a distant past. The young narrator compares himself to the last of the Mohicans, haunted by a longing for a mystical past to which later in life he is able to give a name, the neolithic: "nostalgie du néolithique, qui comprime mon regret du temps passé et ma tristesse du temps qui passe." (37) The word "neolithic" represents for him both time and space: "le néolithique est partout loin des concentrations humaines, des amassements d'objets, dans un hameau, un lieu-dit, un écart...et dans tout ce qui est au bord, jamais au coeur ou au milieu."(37) Thus the neolithic is an oppositional time and space, separate from the people and objects of lived experience. Along with the nostalgia for this space and time runs the realization that it is unattainable, at least in the actual world, in the America of lived experience, as is attested by the narrator's insistence upon loss - of Amerindian peoples, of the passenger pigeon, of the great herd of bison on the prairies, of the South. The defeat of the South in the American Civil War is a significant loss in the mind of the narrator, who equates the Confederate army with the defeated French. There are numerous passages in the novel where it seems as if the span of time separating the American Civil War from the war in Europe has been abolished and the two events are unfolding simultaneously. The narrator, reflecting on the fate of those who oppose the conqueror makes this observation: "Moi, dont l'oreille traîne de l'Histoire qui se fait à l'Histoire qui s'est faite: saboteurs, franc-tireurs là-bas, résistants, maquisards ici, même combat là-bas et ici? Et je réponds oui. " (83) In the mind of the young narrator both history past and history in the making are filled with the same danger and death. He is just as powerless to change the fate of his own country as he is to alter the course of the words of the history book which will inevitably tell of the downfall of the "paradisiaque jardin du

Sud." (102)

Although time and space are fleeting in Berger's fictional world, where America itself is a space of nostalgic imagining ("je pleure l'Amérique, où je n'irai pas" 137) they can be captured in language. There are many passages in this novel, beautifully written, which express the notion of language as a medium enabling the narrator to catch up with time. Once the boy narrator has experienced the loss of the various American paradises which he had mentally constructed from his readings, he turns to individual words found in dictionaries and the atlas which evoke the presence of America: "comme si le temps me pressait et que je voulusse le rattraper dans cette course où avec Christophe Colomb au commencement de l'Amérique et de ma vie, j'accuse un retard de plus de quatre siècles." (152) Words have the power to accomplish what the narrator has been seeking all along, the abolition of time:

> J'étais sensible de même aux merveilles de la langue première et les mots indiens ou déformés de l'indien mariés à l'anglais, je les aimais aussi, mots de sang pur et mots métis, et souvent, la séduction qu'ils exerçaient sur moi était si grande, le monde d'images où ils me projetaient si vaste, le tourbillon en moi de leur vie tel, qu'eussé-je trouvé le moyen de me glisser en eux, fût-ce un tout petit peu, fût-ce par un coin de moi, ... alors je fusse allé à leur monde à eux, je fusse né en eux et peut-être eussé-je, homme-mot, gagné leur éternité de dictionnaire. (155-156)

The narrator, by means of his imaginations and the powerful effect of the words he reads, travels in time, through centuries of American history, and in space, over the entire American continent. He adopts various guises according to his reading, becoming Viking, explorer and a multitude of other figures: "Je revêtais tour à tour, suivant les jours, l'occasion d'un livre et le

hasard du passage que je lisais...l'habit de l'exploreur, du coureur des bois, du trappeur, du commerçant..." (153) He is both propelled by words (since it is the power of place names which set him off on his journey), and compelled to seek them out: "Alors quelle ardeur apportais-je, aiguillonné par les découvertes superbes, au pourchas des mots et, comme un faucon sa proie, je les fonçais, je les daguai puis je les liais." (155)

The image of the peregrine falcon is a very significant one which occurs at intervals throughout *Les Matins* and also in *L'Attrapeur d'ombres*.[23] It is an image which links the notion of the discovery of the vast continent of America to the power of language, giving new life to the worn cliché of the "flight of the imagination." The South is " le grand rêve agrarien, sylvestre et bucolique que mon imagination parcourt de ses ailes pérégrines." (111) The image is powerfully exploited at the end of the novel where it becomes a means of vanquishing time and space through language. The narrator's first glimpse of the American army of liberation takes the form of a tank leading the column which bears the name "Peregrine Falcon". This name launches the narrator on an imaginary flight over the continent which takes him westwards to the Pacific and back in time so that he sees the great ocean through the eyes of the great Spanish explorer Vasco Núnez de Balboa, the first European to see the Pacific ocean. Although at the end of the novel the falcon itself disappears into the distance across the ocean, the final note is one of the fulfilment of the American dream, that is to say of the very personalized American dream of Yves Berger. From the image of the falcon disappearing in the distance, the text returns to the tank at the head of the

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23 "De toutes les images qui me font une vie intérieure, le faucon pèlerin celle peut-être que j'aime le plus. Celle dont j'ai le plus besoin en Europe. Un jour, voici longtemps, mon esprit happa l'oiseau, qui depuis lors, ne cesse de m'habiter." (11-12) *L'Attrapeur d'ombres*. Paris: Grasset, 1992.

column[24]:

> Et je me suis dit que je les avais tellement suivis, poursuivis en Amérique, les Américains, que j'avais dû, sans le savoir, les dépasser un jour, de sorte qu'ils m'avaient rejoint, eux, à un moment de ma longue, inépuisable quête, à un moment de mon éternelle course, et je pressentais que l'Amérique, de toute ma vie, jamais ne me lâcherait. (273)

Thus we are left with the impression of a quest having been fulfilled, of the narrator having indeed found the promised land, a land summed up in one word, "Amérique." America in this novel, as in *Le Fou*, is most certainly not a place, but a personalized mythic space created from language, which permits the narrator (and reader) to transcend time, at least momentarily. Berger's America is a paradise constructed of fragments of history, of language and imagination, perhaps the only one possible in the late twentieth century.

In the two works (travelogues rather than novels) which follow *Les matins* , Berger continues the quest for America as mythic space by creating a literary space which is almost devoid of human presence. In *La pierre et le saguaro* only two Americans are worthy of mention (because of their affinity with nature):

> Il n'y a pas beaucoup d'humanité dans *La pierre et le saguaro*. Sans doute parce que de l'Amérique septentrionale je n'aime que la pierre, le saguaro, les Indiens morts. (Georgia O'Keeffe, peut-être l'eussé-je aimée vivante.) J'ajoute, mais on le sait: le ciel, la pluie, l'herbe, les étoiles, Santa Fe, le roadrunner...tout ce qui relève du céleste, du sidéral, du ligneux, du minéral et de l'animal. Il n'y a même pas

[24] Michel Gueldry points out the significance of this image in the transition from history to nature in Berger's later works: "Cette transposition du milieu humain (le char de la Deuxième Guerre) au monde naturel (l'oiseau), et l'abolition de toute distance entre lui-même et les formes animales et végétales, résultent sans douted'une intuition longuement mûrie: la Nature ignore l'Histoire. Pour effacer le trépas des Indiens et du Sud, il faut tout simplement revenir aux origines antédiluviennes." 622.

d'humanité du tout dans *La pierre et le saguaro,*
où j'avais pensé placer longuement Edward Abbey. (PS 107)

As we have seen, Berger's America throughout his work, has always been more of a land of the imagination, formed from historical and fictional texts, than a land based on any social or political reality. He states this clearly in *La pierre et le saguaro:* "Les mots et les images des livres, ajoutés aux images des westerns, ont découpé, dans le Nouveau Monde septentrional, le pays de ma vie intérieure." (10)

For Berger, America has been, since childhood, synonymous with the possibility of paradise, if not with its realization. In his visits to the United States, mainly to the West he finds glimpses of that ideal world, as seen in the following extract from *L'Attrapeur d'ombres:*

> Yellowstone donne à imager[25] ce que notre monde aurait pu et aurait dû être: un autre monde et le vrai Nouveau Monde, que le Nouveau Monde n'est pas, où, faute de l'espérer ailleurs, je le cherche, dans l'illusion littéraire de le trouver, quelquefois, et dans l'illusion lyrique de le rendre, quelque fois. Un vrai Nouveau Monde et, dès lors, on aurait été moins préoccupé de découvrir l'Amérique qu'elle eût été partout dans la synonymie (la presque synonymie) que nous établissons entre elle et le paradis. (122)

It is clear in the above quotation that Berger is seeking in America a source of images to be incorporated into his writing and, above all, images which will enable him to fulfil his dream of creating a more perfect world. Thus he privileges certain places which function in his work as powerful symbols. In *La pierre* and *L'Attrapeur* the author turns away from American history and fiction, which influence his earlier novels, towards the natural, non-human world. As Michel Gueldry points out:

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25 "Voici quelque temps que je propose de substituer à imaginer (bien usé, bien vague...) *imager*, c'est-à-dire voir en images, les créer: il suffit d'appuyer sur l'image un peu floue à sa naissance, un peu faible, mal dégagée du placenta cérébral." (AO 16)

> Ce passage d'une perspective essentiellement historique à une approche poétique, puis à une conception purement religieuse, commande toute l'économie de l'oeuvre et aboutit à remplacer l'Amérique humaine, trop humaine par des éléments naturels à la fois temporels et universels transcendant l'Amérique, et même le monde humain par leur indifférence à l'histoire et au temps.[26]

In the two travelogues Berger chooses to focus upon the natural wonders of America. The desert, rock formations, sequoia, cacti are privileged because they outlast the human. Berger as in all his novels is seeking in America timelessness, eternity, an antidote to corruption and death. He is more easily able to establish a relationship with natural formations than with human beings, finding the greatest pleasure in the sight of drifting clouds, towering redwoods or the play of sunlight on the sparse grass of the desert: "Et moi, tout au bonheur de l'herbe dans la lumière." (PS 38). He grieves far more for lost animal species - "je serre contre moi les ombres des espèces massacrées, à jamais éteintes" (AO123) - than for human suffering. As in the novels of the American trilogy the only humans revered are the Amerindians who have a harmonious relationship with nature: "Les Indiens, peu nombreux et pied léger, ne troublent pas et ne défont pas l'ordre naturel." (PS72) Berger himself, as we shall see in his ecological novels, sometimes takes an ironic stance towards the cult of the native, which has become one of the clichés of ecological discourse, but yet his admiration for these peoples is in no way diminished and throughout his work he seeks to resurrect, through language, the beauty of the relationship between native peoples and the land.[27]

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26 "Trois romanciers français" 48.

27 This is reflected in the author's fascination with Indian names and their power of evocation: "Par Sequoyah jé suis venu aux séquoias. Mon indianité me compose un ciel intérieur où brillent, inaltérables, les étoiles qui ont noms Tecumseh, Chief Joseph, Crazy Horse..." (AO 19-20)

The rest of the American people, as far as the author is concerned, are scarcely worth mentioning since he crosses the Atlantic to see America[28], not Americans, whom, in any case, one cannot avoid since they have extended their presence throughout the world. (AO73-74) He reproaches white Americans with having corrupted the native peoples by removing them from their natural environment:

> Tout se passe comme si les Blancs avaient contaminé les Indiens. Jadis, le bison, le poisson, la plante, la racine, le fruit et la prairie, la forêt, la course, la marche faisaient les Indiens tels que les peintres des Indiens nous les ont révélés: grands et minces et agiles. Aujourd'hui lourds et lents et obèses. Quelquefois, je me dis que, Blancs et Rouges confondus, c'est tout un peuple d'Américains qui insulte l'Amérique. (AO 75)

This last quotation is reminiscent of Pierre Loti's observations concerning the Bedouins of the desert who disappointed him by their failure to conform to his preconceived image of them. By adopting this very negative attitude towards America in the flesh, Berger is stating his resignation to the loss of his ideal world and, at the same time, his determination to carry on seeking it in images and recreating it in words. What is important is to hold on to the belief that such an ideal world existed before the proliferation of human beings and their technology destroyed it.

It is ironic that what has so long been thought of as the New World becomes in the writings of Berger a storehouse of the past, a source of historical and literary fragments which are used as material in the construction of a mythic space. In spite of the acknowledgement of the historical failure of America as promised land, the quest for this ideal is

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28 The author has travelled to North America more than one hundred times.

never abandoned. [29] Indeed the space of America for Berger, as for many writers before him, symbolises the quest for an ideal place. What the vastness of America provides is a renewal of hope and, above all, a rejuvenation of language. This is clearly expressed by the author in *La pierre et le saguaro*:

> Je ne pars jamais pour les Etats-Unis (le voyage américain, ainsi que j'aime à dire) que je ne me livre à l'opération qui consiste à plonger "immensité" et "à perte de vue" dans une espèce de tension fervente à quoi j'oblige mon esprit. Le ciel américain. L'espace américain. Les nuages d'Amérique. ....L'eau frémissante de la fièvre me gagne et, après un temps d'incubation, je vois "immensité" et "à perte de vue" dans une sorte de jeunesse, de premier matin du monde. Ces mots désormais lavés, nettoyés, décapés du temps (de l'habitude et de l'usure). Chacun d'eux aigu comme une lame trempée. (12-13)

For Berger, as for Le Clézio, the re-enchantment of the world depends on language, or more specifically, on re-establishing the connection between word and concept. For Berger, America provides the most fertile ground for this re-enchantment. His "voyage américain" is a quest, not so much for an ideal place, as for an ideal language.

This topos of the American quest figures as a major theme in another novel of the late twentieth century, *Volkswagen Blues* by Jacques Poulin (1984). Although, because of its plain, understated language, Poulin's novel seems much more anchored in the daily routine of contemporary life in comparison to the lyrical flights of imagination which form a large part of Berger's novels, *Volkswagen Blues* is also a quest for a mythic America.

Volkswagen Blues.

Like the novels of Berger, Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* uses the space of

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[29] It is in fact pursued, as we shall see in the next chapter, in the creation of the "New New World" in the novel *Immobile dans le Courant du Fleuve* (1994)

America as an essential component of the narrative whilst ignoring much of its political and social reality. It is necessary at this point to define what is meant by "America". Since we are comparing here a novel from France and one from Quebec, the space of America in the two novels does not exactly coincide. For Berger, writing from a European perspective, Canada is part of that "immensité" which so appeals to the claustrophobic European bounded by the frontiers of a small country. For Poulin, "America" means the United States, a space which stands in contrast to the security of the walled city of Quebec.[30] For both authors America is synonymous with movement and quest for the promised land. The most striking similarity between the two novels is the preoccupation with the history of America and the use of textual fragments in the rewriting of that history within the novel. In this respect these two authors are typical of the late twentieth century trend towards rewriting history to include hitherto ignored perspectives, such as that of the Amerindian peoples. Both authors emphasize the fact that this history is composed only of textual fragments, suggesting the impossibility of ever forming a complete picture. There is a significant passage in *Volkswagen Blues* which illustrates the importance of these historical fragments. Jack is reflecting on the power of the great American Dream:

> Il prétendait que, depuis le commencement du monde, les gens étaient malheureux parce qu'ils n'arrivaient pas à retrouver le paradis terrestre. Ils avaient gardé dans leur tête l'image d'un pays idéal et ils le cherchaient partout. Et lorsqu'ils avaient trouvé l'Amérique, pour eux c'était le vieux rêve qui se réalisait et ils allaient être libres et heureux....
>
> Avec le temps, le "Grand Rêve de l'Amérique" s'était brisé en miettes comme tous les rêves, mais il

[30] Although Quebec city occupies only a small part of *Volkswagen Blues* it features more prominently in other novels by Poulin, particularly in his first one, *Mon Cheval pour un royaume*. (1967)

> renaissait de temps à autre comme un feu qui couvait sous la cendre. Cela s'était produit au 19e siècle lorsque les gens étaient allés dans l'Ouest. Et parfois, en traversant l'Amérique, les voyageurs retrouvaient des parcelles du vieux rêve qui avaient été éparpillées ici et là, dans les musées, dans les grottes et les canyons, dans les parcs nationaux comme ceux de Yellowstone et de Yosemite, dans les déserts et sur les plages comme celles de la Californie et de l'Oregon. (101)

Much of the novel is in fact composed of these "parcelles du vieux rêve" both on a historical and a personal level. The protagonists, the writer Jack Waterman (who belongs to the category of "gens malheureux") and the young métis woman, Pitsémine, known as la Grande Sauterelle, travel together from the Gaspé peninsula to San Francisco in search of their own personalized version of the American dream. Jack is on a quest to find his brother Théo, whom he sees as a missing part of himself - "la partie de moi-même qui a oublié de vivre" (137), that is to say, the adventurous nomad who stands in contrast to the sedentary Quebec writer. Pitsémine, because of her métis heritage which prevents her integration into either white or Amerindian society, is searching for a sense of unified identity. "Se réconcilier avec elle-même" is the purpose of her quest. (81) Their journey takes them along the waterways followed by French explorers and routes taken by pioneers on the long and arduous journey towards the West, in particular the Oregon Trail. The various museums they visit en route, as well as the books they read, provide glimpses of the life of the travellers who have preceded them. This reliance on fragments of text and information gleaned from museum reconstructions of significant episodes of pioneer life lends to the whole venture (and of course to the novel itself) a postmodern sense of

"ungraspability." [31]

Both the quest of the pioneers and the search for Théo progress by means of signs. The ruts of wagon wheels on the trail, grave markers, names carved on rock indicate the passage of the pioneers. Police records, an inscription in a visitor's book, vague recollections of those who have met Théo provide clues which lead Jack across the continent. All of these signs are accepted with no attempt made to interpret them. No complete picture of pioneer life emerges and certainly no depiction of the arrival of the pioneers at their destination. Similarly there is little speculation as to why Théo might have been pursuing this particular journey. One sign simply leads to another. Jack and la Grande Sauterelle are so far removed in time from the original events (the quest for the promised land, Théo's journey West fifteen years earlier) that it is not possible to reach any core of truth or coherent explanation about either one. This implies something about the status of myth in the contemporary era where we live with the impossibility of grasping in totality what has been so long absent from our world that it is questionable whether any foundation for the myth ever existed at all, but nevertheless there remains the persistent desire for myth, which results in a form of game playing, hunting fragments.

This can best be illustrated by looking at one of the fragments of myth that recurs at intervals throughout the novel in the form of a motif which is closely linked to the myth of America: the search for gold. Théo's postcard which sparks Jack's quest to find his missing brother had remained for fifteen

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[31] Ginette Michaud outlines the aspects of *Volkswagen Blues* which coincide with the general consensus as to what constitutes the postmodern novel: " un goût marqué pour tout ce qui est visible, audible et perceptible, mieux, un véritable amour pour les situations dites "concrètes" ... un certain dégoût pour les abstractions, les "grandes idées" et les spéculations théoriques; la réactualisation de genres "anciens" (conte, allégorie, fable etc); le retour à des shémas narratifs mythiques.... "Récits postmodernes?" *Etudes françaises* 21,3 68-9

years between the pages of a book called *The Golden Dream*. (14) As they are travelling along the highway, Jack tells his companion the story of Eldorado and how the legend of this wonderful country of gold is based on an illusion created by the light. (29) The two companions experience their own version of this legend when they visit the Royal Bank Plaza building in Toronto, the glass panels of which contain gold dust:

> Au milieu des édifices mornes et gris, il pointait ses deux triangles dorés vers le ciel..... La lumière paraissait venir de l'intérieur, elle était vive et chaleureuse comme du miel et ils ne pouvaient pas s'empêcher de penser à l'Or des Incas et à la légende de l'*Eldorado*. C'était comme si tous les rêves étaient encore possibles. Et pour Jack, dans le plus grand secret de son coeur, c'était comme si tous les héros du passé étaient encore des héros. (79)

There is here an acceptance of illusion accompanied by delight in it. During the course of the journey, which has involved alternative perspectives on history and legend, the hero figures of Jack's youth, and by implication his brother Théo, have been revealed as far less than perfect. Nevertheless, Jack holds on to the possibility of heroism. This possibility, like the glimmer of light which recreates for a moment a wonderful myth, is as much as we can hope for in the contemporary world.

All the quests undertaken in this novel are marked by the sense of an elusive goal, just as elusive as any attempt by the reader to get to the bottom of the multilayered structure of this deceptively simple story. The topos of the movement towards the West and the quest for an ideal world occur in different forms throughout the novel. There are the pioneers seeking a better life in "le pays idéal"; Jack's brother Théo seeking adventure and eventually joining members of the "beat" generation in San Francisco;

the hippies seeking "une nouvelle conception de la vie et des rapports entre les gens"(278); the old vagabond who thinks he is Ernest Hemingway making his way towards his own personal paradise on the Oregon coast and, of course, Jack and la Grande Sauterelle following vague clues in search of Théo. In the case of all these movements the endpoint remains vague, as the emphasis is on the movement itself. The elusive nature of the search for Théo influences the way in which the other quests are seen, as, for example, in Jack's version of the pioneers heading West:

> Ce qu'ils cherchent ce n'est pas l'aventure, c'est... en fait, ils ne le savent pas exactement. Ils ont entendu dire que, dans l'Ouest, il y avait des terres très vastes et très fertiles; ils ont décidé d'y aller, c'est tout. Ils pensent qu'ils vont trouver une vie meilleure là-bas, sur les bords du Pacifique. Ce qu'ils cherchent au fond, c'est le bonheur. (179-180)

As shown in the above quotation, Jack finds it impossible to formulate a clear picture of the paradise towards which the pioneers are heading. The goals are vague - "une meilleure vie", "le bonheur"- but these are surely the goals of most human beings in any period of history and describe in the simplest of terms the promised land. Jack's attempts to describe Théo are also vague, since he is no longer able to distinguish between the real attributes of his brother and the imaginary ones - " la silhouette de son frère grandissait et prenait place dans une galérie imaginaire où se trouvait une étrange collection de personnages." (217) Significantly Jack has not thought to bring along a photograph of his brother.

At the end of the novel, in foggy San Francisco, the quest for Théo comes to an end. This brother, who has been given hero status throughout the narrative, is now paralyzed, inarticulate and does not recognize Jack. He is

one of the many people for whom the journey West was more of an accident than a positive undertaking, people who "avaient été emportés par le courant et étaient venus échouer sur les bords du Pacifique." (279) This failure of the quest, however, does not cause great distress to Jack, who is able to dismiss the whole episode by the realization: "Peut-être que j'aimais seulement l'image que je m'étais faite de lui." (289)

Similarly, the other examples of movement toward the West are left without resolution. There remain no traces of the hippie movement in San Francisco. Where hippies once gathered there are now stores and restaurants. "Jack déclara que les commerçants étaient les gens les plus stables au monde." (278) We learn that the old vagabond, upon reaching his own little paradise in Oregon, heads for California then makes his way back towards the East. Again there is the sense that all these characters are involved in a game. In this respect Poulin's characters resemble the players in Verne's *Le testament d'un excentrique* as they move from space to space across the game-board of America. Unlike the pioneers, for whom the goal of their journey was the most important aspect and who were sustained during the arduous trek by thoughts of a better life to come, the late twentieth century characters are caught in the flow of the movement towards the West, the path of which has been traced by many generations of people seeking the American dream.

This sense of drifting however, does not, in *Volkswagen Blues,* have the negative connotation which we usually give to that word. Here it is as if the author is expressing the idea that ceaseless movement has, after all, become a condition of contemporary existence and may as well be enjoyed. This is apparent in the quotation from Daniel Boone which is spoken by la Grande Sauterelle as she says goodbye to Jack at the end of the novel: "Je me

sens parfois comme une feuille sur un torrent. Elle peut tournoyer, tourbillonner et se retourner, mais elle va toujours vers l'avant." (289) In this respect the novel reflects a feeling common in late twentieth century society, that the postmodern era is one of a journey without a specific goal but that the journey itself is considered valuable. As Gilles Marcotte states: "On comprend que ce n'était pas, en vérité, pour Théo que Jack avait entrepris le voyage. C'était pour le voyage."[32] For Gilles Marcotte this lack of completion expresses Poulin's basic intention in the novel: "Ce qui devait ou aurait pu être, dans une tout autre perspective, à la suite de Théo, une histoire de la pénétration du continent américain, devient une collection discontinue d'histoires, de visites, de rencontres - chacune plus importante que le sens général de l'entreprise."

This emphasis on fragmentation in *Volkswagen Blues* implies the impossibility of ever finding a unified meaning. Just as the translator in Poulin's *Les Grandes Marées* searches without success for definitive translations, so the characters in this novel are never able to reach the end point of their quest. In *Volkswagen Blues* there is no sense of fulfillment or completion, but throughout the novel the characters behave as if there were. In this respect the novel bears a ressemblance to the works of Yves Berger, all of which are haunted by the impossible quest to stop time and the recognition of this impossibility.

Both Poulin and Berger, in very different tones, express in their work something about the status of myth in the late twentieth century. There is the recognition that an ideal place - utopia or promised land- existing in space and time, which seemed in the nineteenth century realizable, is

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[32] Gilles Marcotte. "Histoires de zouaves," *Etudes françaises* 21:3 7.

unattainable in the postmodern world where all has been explored, discovered and rearranged for consumption by tourists. However, the desire for myth, the desire for some ideal place which functions as a refuge from the trials of daily life, is very much part of the human psyché. Berger's somewhat heavy lyricism and Poulin's light ironical tone both express this desire. *Le Fou* and *Les Matins* as well as *Volkswagen Blues* are structured around the notion of the quest for the unattainable which expresses itself as a nomadic narrative form wandering through the space of America and pausing at different moments of American history. Simon Harel sees the quest in *Volkswagen Blues* as having a commemorative function: "La quête est parcours, déplacement, fuite en avant, oblitération du passé, mais aussi retour obsessionel vers les traces d'une première occupation humaine." [33] It is a tribute to former seekers of the promised land.

Volkswagen Blues contains many references to potential promised lands which missed fulfillment due to the course of history - America before the arrival of the Europeans, America as French territory, the West, the hippie communities and finally the image of Théo which is inextricably linked to the paradise of childhood. Underlying all of these is the notion of writing itself. The episode of the imaginary ideal writer shows another potential, but unattainable paradise, one in which the characters know exactly where they are going and take the author with them into "un Nouveau Monde." (50) For Jack the actual process of writing is a laborious process, a daily grind, similar, perhaps, to the slow and painful progress towards an undefined goal undertaken by the pioneers on the Oregon Trail.

These potential promised lands are all spaces which have been lost in

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[33] Simon Harel, *Le voleur de parcours* (Montréal: Les Editions du Préambule, 1989) 169.

the real world and are now accessible only in fragmented form through text or story telling. The two maps in the Gaspé museum suggest the existence of an earlier, more wonderful America than that through which the protagonists travel, guided by road maps. The map of former French territories is "incroyable et très émouvant à regarder" and equally "impressionnante" is the one showing pre-Columbian America. (20) Jack's stories of his childhood contain not only idealized images of Théo as hero but also imply Jack's nostalgia for the existence of a world in which heroes retained their status, unlike that of the late twentieth century where history is subject to scrutiny and all heroes become suspect. "Don't talk to me about heroes!" declares Jack just before the end of his quest to find his brother. (279)

Most important in the search for fragments of the American dream and for the structure of the novel itself are books. This is one of the aspects of *Volkswagen Blues* which makes it very much a postmodern novel. Like most of Poulin's novels, this is a book about books and about the process of writing. Texts provide the impetus for the quest around which the novel is structured. From Théo's postcard found in a copy of *The Golden Dream* (14) to the photograph of Théo marked "unidentified man" in the book *Beat Angels* (265), textual clues indicate traces of the missing brother and move the narrative through its series of episodes to its inconclusive end.

The novel is a quest across the space of America and also across time, following tracks which are so faint as to be barely perceptible, as if to emphasise the fact that the real Théo, and also the America of the American Dream, have been so overlayered by representations and interpretations that the very existence of the original becomes questionable. As in the work of Baudrillard there is the sense that not only has reality been banished from

the world, but that, in the age of the hyperreal, the very concept of reality is lost. One metaphor of this removal by stages from reality is provided in the image of the Oregon Trail. The book which guides Jack and la Grande Sauterelle on their quest towards the West is *The Oregon Trail Revisited,* not a history book, but one which tells tourists where to find specific landmarks and traces of the pioneers many of which are scarcely visible. (200)

Another important text is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* which moves the quest from the Oregon Trail to California, from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Jack remembers a significant quotation from Kerouac's preface:

> La route a remplacé l'ancien "trail" des pionniers de la marche vers l'Ouest; elle est le lieu mystique qui rattache l'Américain à son continent, à ses compatriotes. (258)

One of the main spatial components of *Volkswagen Blues* is the highway, the "lieu mystique" which permits a twentieth century version of the discovery of America, just as the railway did in the nineteenth century. Unlike the old pioneer trails which led to a new land and, in the minds of hopeful travellers, to a better life, the modern system of highways is a network which encourages perpetual motion, a feature of American life which, as we shall see later, Jean Baudrillard emphasises in his *Amérique*. Most of the spaces in Poulin's novel are areas of transience - campgrounds, hostels, hotels and of course, the Volkswagen itself, which has covered more miles than its occupants, having travelled in Europe, Eastern Canada and Florida, before being bought by Jack. It will continue its travels with la Grande Sauterellle after Jack returns to Quebec, participating in the sense of perpetual motion which is so important in this novel. The Volkswagen is symbolic also of the importance of language in this novel. Amongst the graffiti inside the vehicle is the inscription "Die

Sprache is das Haus des Seins," suggesting that the quest will find resolution, not in a place, but in language. The wanderings of the Volkswagen represent "le nomadisme d'une écriture en cours d'invention." [34]

The emphasis on highways, waterways and places of temporary residence through which characters drift like leaves in the current creates in the novel the sense of America as the space most representative of the postmodern human condition, a space where individuals move within a network whose totality they cannot perceive, seeking an unattainable "elsewhere." As Naïm Kattan says: "Aussi l'Ouest américain a-t-il toujours été 'l'ailleurs': ce lieu toujours éloigné que l'on n'atteint pas mais qui est toujours le but rêvé et la terre d'une quête qui ne doit jamais finir." [35]

The America represented in *Volkswagen Blues* is certainly not the earthly paradise which generations of myth-seekers have hoped to attain. It is, instead, a country founded on violence, a place where heroic dreams, as Jack finds out, are proved illusory. It is, nonetheless, a space which allows the quest for a personal paradise. As Paul Socken indicates:

> The model of re-capturing the ideal creation is not found in historical figures of the past, nor in history itself. *Volkswagen Blues* suggests that the spirit that animates the pioneers' desire is still alive in spite of its repeated failures, but it is to be most fruitfully explored within the individual. [36]

What the space of America provides, in the novels of Berger and Poulin, is a space which permits the exploration of the self in relation to the world. America is seen as a model for humanity and, particularly for the future of Europe. Krishan Kumar expresses the notion of America as an

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[34] Harel 167.
[35] Kattan 116.
[36] Socken 65.

encapsulation of the postmodern world:

> With the growth of an electronically mediated reality the hyperreal is becoming the condition of the whole of the modern world. But postmodernists are particularly drawn to America as the capital, as it were, of hyperreality, the model of our future (once again). Just as earlier theories of modernity read the whole world through key modernist cities such as Paris and New York, so current theories of post-modernity read the contemporary world through American cities such as Las Vegas and Los Angeles. [37]

The hyperreality of America is explored by Jean Baudrillard, the "postmodern Tocqueville." [38]

Jean Baudrillard's *Amérique*.(1986)

For Jean Baudrillard America is a mythic space,[39] a place endowed with that mythic quality par excellence - timelessness. In *Amérique* Baudrillard implies that America and Europe do not occupy the same time and space, since the former stands outside of history, specifically outside of the nineteenth-century thinking which continues to dominate France. America has features of both the premodern and the postmodern world. On the one hand it is a primitive society: "Au fond les Etats-Unis, avec leur espace, leur raffinement technologique, leur bonne conscience brutale, y compris dans les espaces qu'ils ouvrent à la simulation, sont *la seule société primitive actuelle*" (21), and on the other hand it is "une utopie réalisée"

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37 Kumar 124.

38 Baudrillard is appropriately referred to as such by Jean-Philippe Mathy. *Extrême-Occident. French Intellectuals and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 234.

39 Mario Klarer points out that Baudrillard's *Amérique* " stands at the end of a long tradition of French evaluations of America: "With Baudrillard - more than 150 years after Toqueville's *Democracy In America* (1835) - America again turned into a fictional space onto which French avant-garde theories or ideologies tried to inscribe themselves." Mario Klarer, "Jean Baudrillard's *America*: Deconstruction of America and America as Deconstruction," *Amerikastudien - American Studies*. 1991 36:2 227.

(195). Jean Philippe Mathy in *Extrême Occident*, a study of the relationship of twentieth century European writers to America, detects in several writers, including Umberto Eco and Baudrillard, this particular European attitude towards America:

> The two versions of American timelessness, prehistory and posthistory, are often grounded as it were in descriptions of the physical space of America. In the case of the New World as prehistory, the references are usually to the natural space and scope of the continent, while the examples used to illustrate the posthistorical character of the United States are drawn from artificially constructed sites such as Disneyland or the Getty Museum.
>
> The southwestern deserts are often used by European travelers as the paradigmatic sites of America as prehistory. (176-177)[40]

The space of the desert figures prominently in *Amérique*, as it does in the works of many European writers who have travelled in America, for it is the desert which best represents for the European traveller that immensity which dwarfs the human, and in which, time and space coordinates cease to have meaning. "For Baudrillard, American culture having stepped out of history, stands outside time. The timeless spatiality of contemporary America finds its most powerful symbol in the desolation of the great southwestern desert." [41] What is most striking in Baudrillard's account of America, however, is the way in which the representation of the desert, whilst evoking vastness and emptiness, departs from the traditional symbolism (the desert as the antithesis of culture, of the human) and becomes incorporated into the author's vision of America as the realm of the hyperreal. "Le déroulement du désert est infiniment proche de l'éternité de la pellicule." (7) There are several

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[40] Mathy, Jean-Philippe. *Extrême-Occident. French Intellectuals and America*. U Chicago Press, 1993.

[41] Mathy 229.

references in *L'Amérique* to America as film. Baudrillard states clearly his intention of ignoring American political and social reality in his search for a particular image of America:

> J'ai cherché l'Amérique sidérale, celle de la liberté vaine et absolue des freeways, jamais celle du social et de la culture - celle de la vitesse désertique, des motels et des surfaces minérales, jamais l'Amérique profonde des moeurs et des mentalités. J'ai cherché dans la vitesse du scénario, dans le réflexe indifférent de la télévision, dans le film des jours et des nuits à travers un espace vide, dans la succession merveilleusement sans affect des signes, des images, des visages, des acteurs rituels de la route, ce qui est le plus proche de l'univers nucléaire et éhuclée qui est virtuellement le nôtre jusque dans les chaumières européennes. (10)

Baudrillard is seeking to portray America as an image of the postmodern condition. Thus it becomes in his text a place which has no depth, a space where a transient society circulates endlessly. "La circulation pure" of America stands in contrast to "la mélancolie des analyses européennes." (55) Above all it is a place where metaphysical interpretation is irrelevant. The whole of America is, for Baudrillard, a gigantic simulacrum. Americans themselves are simulacra, unaware ot their condition. (58) This notion of American obliviousness is reminiscent of a passage in Berger's *L'Attrapeur d'ombres* in which he states that Americans simply do not see themselves or each other, each being encased in his solitude. This view of Americans is part and parcel of the American myth. Baudrillard adopts, with deliberate irony, the perspective of the anthropologist observing a society from outside. Thus his America cannot be interpreted as travelogue or sociological document, although the text contains elements of both. The reader best gains a sense of Baudrillard's America (and the postmodern condition) in the recurring

motifs which run throughout the work.

There are many references to the motion of traffic on the freeways. Baudrillard expresses his fascination with the fluidity of the freeway system: "On raconte même que des familles y circulent perpétuellement en mobil-home sans jamais en sortir." (106) The sign "Must exit" amounts to an order of expulsion from paradise. (107) America is a space of perpetual motion with no sense of destination. People circulate in the same way that money does: "En Amérique, vous êtes fou à lier si au lieu de croire à l'argent et à sa fluidité merveilleuse, vous prétendez le porter sur vous en espèces." (122) Baudrillard's perception of postmodern society here bears out David Harvey's argument that the notion of postmodernity is born of the move to immaterial forms of money and accelerated circulation of capital. There is no escape from the perpetual motion: "Toute cette société ici, y compris sa part active et productive, tout le monde court devant soi parce qu'on a perdu la formule pour s'arrêter." (41)

This idea of American society as one of constant motion, and ceaseless activity is not specifically a postmodern vision. Tocqueville, Bourget and other nineteenth-century European writers experienced the same sensation during their stay in America. In the works of these nineteenth-century writers, however, the activity had an underlying purpose - the building of cities and fortunes - whereas in Baudrillard's *Amérique,* the constant motion has no meaning or purpose. For the American, "circuler est son emploi naturel." (187)

This ceaseless motion eliminates social contact. The American individual, as described by Baudrillard, lives in solitude. The solitary jogger or the intellectual at his word-processor are typical figures: "Partout la même

blanche solitude, partout la même réfraction narcissique, qu'elle s'adresse au corps ou aux facultés mentales." (69) The child in school is also locked into the same circular solitude: "Voyez l'enfant et son computer à l'école: vous croyez qu'on l'a rendu interactif, qu'on l'a ouvert sur le monde? On a tout juste réussi à créer un circuit intégré enfant-machine." (72-73)

In Baudrillard's vision America is both repulsive and fascinating; repulsive because the poor have no place in this "utopie réalisée": "Vive le Quatrième Monde, celui auquel on dit: 'l'utopie est réalisée, que ceux qui n'y ont pas part disparaissent," (222) but fascinating because it offers relief from the European preoccupation with transcendance and the quest for meaning. One can lose oneself in the endless circulation: "la valse des simulacres et des images ici est telle que, comme pour les éléments du rêve vous devez en accepter la succession même inintelligible, vous devez faire de ce mouvement le fait irresistible et fondamental." (134) Baudrillard's America is indeed a mythic space, resembling that of a nightmare or a dream.

We have seen in the different representations of America studied in this chapter a progression towards irreality. Although America never loses its appeal as potential promised land, even in the late twentieth century, those who seek such a place find themselves caught in the perpetual motion which has overtaken, not only America, but the whole of the postmodern world. If the ideal mythic space cannot be located in America, we might infer that it cannot exist at all. However, since the human imagination, so it seems, never loses the desire for an ideal place, the exhaustion of geographical possibilities does not deter us from the quest. We may have run out of space, but there remains the possibility of going back in time to a better world, that of the natural paradise.

Chapter 4.

The Natural Paradise.

The particular mythic space with which this chapter is concerned is that of the natural paradise, which has remained present in the Western imagination for centuries, evolving from the Garden to the ecological utopia.[1] We are reminded of Northrop Frye's affirmation that utopia has shifted from an area locatable in space and that, if utopia can be thought of at all, it is as an expression of "the shifting and dissolving movement of society that is gradually replacing the fixed locations of life." (133-4) We have seen in the earlier chapters that, like the utopias of which Frye speaks, the mythic spaces of the nineteenth century were represented as being real spaces which might be found by making a journey (as in the travel accounts of Loti) or by accident (as in Verne's novels). Those same spaces in the later decades of the twentieth century (as portrayed in the novels of Le Clézio for example) are no longer separate from the world of everyday life but are much more mental spaces which serve to reenchant the lives of those who suffer the oppressive effects of our highly urbanized, industrialized, technological and violent society.

In the pages that follow I wish to discuss how changes in our perception of nature reflect our attitude towards myth and our sense of identity and our relationship to the world in which we live.[2] We shall

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1 The concept of "nature" like that of "environment" is problematic. These are commonly used terms which defy definition. David Harvey discusses the complexity of these notions: "That a single word should be used in such a multitude of ways testifies to its fundamental incoherence as a unitary concept." (117) *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference.*

2 Two interesting books on the historical evolution of the idea of nature are *The Social Creation of Nature* by Neil Evernden (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1992) and Max Oelschlager's *The Idea of Wilderness. From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (Yale UP, 1991). The latter explores the human need for the existence of wild nature.

explore the way in which nature is represented as mythic space, Garden or ecological paradise, and particularly the transition from a modern to a postmodern perception of nature, seeking to establish links between the notion of the postmodern condition as expressed by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity* and the rise of ecological thinking.

Harvey affirms (and our experience confirms) that in the twentieth century we have become a society of transients living with the sense that all is ephemeral and fragmented, that there is no centre, no transcendance and even no clear sense of the self, that language cannot express reality and, if all this is so, we cannot be sure of the existence of any reality. In the course of the twentieth century it would appear that we have become increasingly individual rather than social beings, especially since the demise of the last great social utopia, communism. In discourses of the late twentieth century there is more emphasis on individual development (as shown in our obsession with perfect, healthy bodies and the proliferation of "self-help" books) than with social projects aimed at creating a better world for all. The ideal of social progress which was one of the driving force of industrial modernity seems to have fragmented into areas of individual development. Richard Newbold Adams in *The Eighth Day* charts the recent developments in Western Culture:

> The nineteenth century vision of how to make the world a better place in which to live was called 'progress'. It was a coal-fueled ideology for a vast colonial expansion and it was crushingly discredited by World War I and the interwar era of stagnation and depression. Development is the successor to the vision of progress that accompanied the petroleum-fueled spread of industrialism in the post-World War II nationalizing. if the illusion of progress was dashed by the First World War, the 'development' illusion began to crack and fragment, on the one hand, with increasing poverty,

> social movements and revolts, military interventions and regional wars, and, on the other hand, environmental pollution and degradation. [3]

If we have indeed lost faith in the ideas of *progress* and *development* this might explain the turning inwards (individualism) which has become prevalent in contemporary society. Although the myth of social progress may have vanished, the desire for myth itself is eternally human. In the late twentieth century the search for myth has shifted from social to personal, mental space.

This shift can be seen in our changing relationship with nature. As individualism has progressed, so has our separation from the natural world. Possibly we should see this the other way round, that is, the decreasing role of nature in our lives, due to urbanization, industrialization and, most recently the invasion of every aspect of life by computer technology, has resulted in a tendency of the human being to turn inwards. We have a tendency to live, physically, in enclosed spaces and , mentally, isolated in the space of the imagination or the virtual world of cyberspace. This interposition of technology between the human and the material world, for some a great advance, for others a science-fiction nightmare, is a distinctive feature of late twentieth century culture.

What the previous chapters would seem to point to, however, is that it really is not possible to consider postmodernity as a distinct cultural movement, since it is indeed the "cultural logic of late capitalism" of which Jameson speaks, and, as such, represents a continuation of, not a rupture with, Modernity. In the spatial representations of the late nineteenth and late twentieth century novels with which we are concerned here, it is possible to

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[3] Richard Newbold Adams, *The Eighth Day* (Austin: U Texas Press, 1988) 234.

trace this continuity, even though our sense of being and our relationship to the world we inhabit may have changed dramatically in the space of a century. A sense of loss and a nostalgia for the "real" pervade novels of both periods. This loss is born of the separation of human beings from the physical world, that is to say, our relationship with the world we inhabit has become increasingly abstract. Tools, machines, and all manner of electronic gadgets have over the centuries (probably since the discovery of fire and much later, agriculture) reduced our involvement with the natural world. Industry and technology have for centuries been building barricades between man and environment, as is evident in mechanized agricultural practices, or the ever more complex means of buying and trading goods. In almost every aspect of our daily lives machines serve as intermediaries between us and the physical world performing many of our daily activities. Our leap into cyberspace, or virtual reality, is just the logical extension of this movement away from the natural, physical world.

Our decreasing involvement with the natural world has altered our perception of nature.[4] Settlement, agriculture and urbanisation have had an enormous impact on the way the natural environment is perceived. The rapidly increasing spread of urban settlement and consequent diminishing of wilderness areas throughout the twentieth century has led to the perception that nature is on the brink of extinction. Neil Everden argues that the domination of nature has occurred on both a physical and conceptual level:

> Through our conceptual domestication of nature, we extinguish wild otherness even in the imagination. As a consequence we are effectively alone, and must build

[4] There has been much discussion about the difficulty of defining the concept of "naure". According to Raymond Williams the idea of nature "contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history... both complicated and changing, as other ideas and experiences change." Quoted in *Justice, Nature & the Geography of Difference* 117.

> our world solely of human artifacts. The more we come to dwell in an explained world, a world of uniformity and regularity, a world without the possibility of miracles, the less we are able to encounter anything but ourselves. (116)

The ecology movement which gathered momentum over the last decades of the twentieth century contained the "possibility of miracles" in that it did attempt to rekindle a sense of wonder at the existence of the non-human natural world. This sense became dulled by the proliferation of environmental discourse and the notion of sustainable growth. "The wild other disappears the instant it is demystified and saved as a managed resource." [5] At the beginning of the twenty-first century we are no closer to solving our environmental problems than we were three decades ago. We seem to have shifted to the realm of virtual ecology. By this expression I mean to suggest that our concern for the environment leads not to action but to a mass of debate about our condition and the illusion that material problems may be solved by an exchange of words. For example there is still much discussion concerning the 1997 Kyoto summit and the percentage of toxic emissions allowable. We are so caught up in the figures that we tend to forget that nothing has actually been accomplished. We shall explore this notion of virtual ecology later in this chapter, with reference to the last two novels of Yves Berger, *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* and *Le monde après la pluie*, in order to see how the mythic space of the natural paradise is represented in a world where nature is perceived as being on the brink of extinction.

The ecology movement can be seen as a facet of the late twentieth century social condition (the condition of postmodernity) and also as a

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[5] Evernden 131.

counter-cultural movement towards the same. The ecology movement's critique of technology and desire for a harmonious relationship with nature suggest a neo-romantic oppositional attitude, whereas the tendency to see human beings as an integral part of a larger network situates ecological thinking within the postmodernist view of a globalized society.

The French philosopher Luc Ferry sees in the ecology movement, or more specifically, in the notion of deep ecology [6], an extreme critique of modernity and the idea of progress. It is a desire to erase the effects of modernity and humanism, a desire to give to nature the same rights as human beings, the aim of which is to make the postmodern world resemble the premodern: "D'un point de vue philosophique, c'est bien toute la tradition de l'humanisme héritée des doctrines du contrat social et des droits de l'homme qu'il s'agit de déconstruire si l'on veut faire apparaître le statut juridique des îles et des forêts." (138)[7] Ferry does also point out that this defence of the rights of nature is a logical sequence to the formulation of the rights of oppressed peoples, women, the foetus, etc, suggesting that the ecology movement does not represent a rupture with all other social trends, but rather democracy taken to absurd lengths. Before going on to examine postmodern ecological views of nature, I would like to return to a consideration of one of the novels discussed in the first chapter, *L'île mystérieuse*, in order to reexamine the question of modernity versus postmodernity from the perspective of the human relationship to nature. In many ways Verne' s representation of the natural paradise is the opposite of

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[6] Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess first used this term in order to distinguish between two forms of ecological thinking, shallow ecology or environmentalism which is preoccupied with conservation of nature in the interest of humans and deep ecology which is biocentric and, taken to extremes, would advocate actively reducing the human population in the interests of nature.

[7] Luc Ferry. *Le nouvel ordre écologique*. Paris: Grasset, 1992.

Berger's, but yet it is also possible to find similarities between the two.

L'île mystérieuse.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, *L'île mysterieuse,* published in 1874, represents what is usually thought of as the Modernist view of nature, that is to say, nature existing for the use of and exploitation by human beings. The five "naufragés de l'air" who come by chance to the mysterious island are portrayed as superior versions of Robinson Crusoe. Starting from scratch, they rebuild on the island the whole of Western industrial civilisation, making the island into a later nineteenth- century paradise, that is to say, an ideal place founded on the notion of scientific achievement and progress. As Simone Vierne says:

> Le chef, donc, recommence tous les gestes primitifs de l'humanité, mais avec les atouts que donnent les connaissances de la science moderne, ainsi appliquée dans une situation tout à fait pré-industrielle. Situation étonnante, où le Paradis est paradisiaque seulement grâce à ce que l'homme a fini par construire patiemment, depuis qu'il en a été chassé. (302)[8]

Men of science such as the engineer Cyrus Smith and Captain Nemo with his advanced technological knowledge are portrayed as demi-gods in this novel. Their role is to advance human progress. Nature exists to supply raw materials which may be converted into energy necessary for this advancement. "L'ingénieur avait confiance, parce qu'il se sentait capable d'arracher à cette nature sauvage tout ce qui serait nécessaire à la vie de ses compagnons et à la sienne." (131)

The opposition of nature and culture is strictly maintained. There is no attempt by the five men to adapt to the environment of the

[8] Simone Vierne. *Jules Verne.* Poitiers: Editions Balland, 1986

island. Instead the island is transformed to meet their requirements. These characters are portrayed as civilized human beings who, even if they wished, could not adopt a primitive life style, for they belong to an era in which the primitive has been firmly rejected. Hence, they are unable to light a fire by rubbing together two sticks, but must instead use glass to magnify the sun's rays. Instead of making clothes from animal skins or simple spinning and weaving, they produce cloth by an industrial felt-making process. The industrialization of the island takes place at such dizzying speed that after only one year: "C'étaient de véritables colons, munis d'armes, d'outils, d'instruments qui avaient su transformer à leur profit les animaux, les plantes et les minéraux de l'île, c'est-à-dire les trois règnes de la nature." (413)

The triumph of culture over nature is clearly illustrated in the recuperation of the castaway Ayrton, who, forced to live alone on the neighboring island of Tabor, has reverted to a condition of bestiality and has become "un sauvage dans toute l'horrible acception du mot." (503) In this novel raw nature, whether mineral, vegetable, animal or human, is never allowed to exist for its own sake, but must always be converted or civilized. In this respect *L'île mystérieuse* presents a view of nature which is the opposite of late twentieth century ecological discourse and there are passages in Verne's novel which, read from the perspective of our own time, are almost comic. One such passage is the seal hunt (an environmentalist's nightmare) which, like the killing and exploitation of all species on the island, is undertaken with great joy by the five colonists. The sealskin is needed to make bellows for the forge which the men have built. "Des soufflets de forge! s'écria Pencroff. Eh bien, voilà des phoques qui ont de la chance!" (195)

In contrast to our present day perception of nature, that of a fragile

world constantly threatened by human encroachment, nature in Verne's novel is abundant and flourishing.[9] In spite of the fact that the five colonists themselves mention, at various points in the novel, the "too good to be true" quality of the island, nature is depicted in this novel as being material, palpable and inexhaustable if not indestructible. Although the island is destroyed by volcanic eruption, the ideal community created by the five men is reconstructed with equal success in a different space in Iowa.[10] The ending of the novel expresses the same optimism prevalent throughout. In spite of the vicissitudes of nature, the law of eternal return will always allow the rebirth of the world and continued progress. As Cyrus Smith explains, the cooling of the earth's interior may lead to dramatic climatic changes and to the destruction of continents, but resurrection will follow: "Peut-être, alors notre sphéroïde se reposera-t-il, se refera-t-il dans la mort pour ressusciter un jour dans des conditions supérieures!" (277) Verne incorporates into this novel, as into many of his works, the linear time of human progress along with the cyclical time of nature. Beneath the changes wrought by civilization lies an immutable reality, according to Cyrus Smith at least: "Les hommes si savants qu'ils puissent être ne pourront jamais changer quoi que ce soit à l'ordre cosmographique établi par Dieu même." (775-776) Although the mention of God seems somewhat out of place in this novel where the man of science appears to fill the role of supreme being, Smith's affirmation does fit the logic of the novel, since even the great genius Nemo must succumb to death in the end and the carefully constructed civilization of the colonists

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9 This sense of the infinite abundance of nature is in contrast to the late nineteenth century concern with the erosion of the natural world due to urbanization. In North America evidence of this concern is seen in the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872.

10 As discussed at the beginning of the previous chapter, for Verne, the great virtue of America is that it can provide space for utopian projects.

sinks beneath the waves.

The existence of the cosmic order alongside the exaltation of human progress brings to mind Baudelaire's description of Modernity as the conjoining of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable.[11] In *L'île mystérieuse* scientific progress which constantly changes the environment is seen as non-threatening because the underlying cosmic order provides a sense of security. As we have seen in chapter one, Verne's later novels express less optimism in this respect.

However fantastic and unlikely the natural paradise of the mysterious island is, Verne is careful to establish an "effet de réel" by situating the island carefully in historical time and geographical space and devoting long passages of the novel to the description of the animal, vegetable and mineral wealth of the island: this narrative technique grants nature a very real presence.

The next novel we shall study is in many ways the opposite of *L'île mystérieuse* and reflects one particular attitude towards nature of our own time, that is environmental discourse, which sees the world as a fragile ecosystem threatened by human exploitation to the extent that survival of all species is in jeopardy.

Immobile dans le courant du fleuve.

In spite of the obvious differences in the attitude towards nature expressed in *L'île mystérieuse* and *Immobile*, there are ways in which Verne's novel is not, in essence, radically different from that of Berger since both portray the relationship between man and nature as an abstract one. In both novels the notion of living in close harmony with the natural world is far

11 See David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. p10

from the minds of the characters, for they are conditioned by the society to which they belong - Verne's colonists to the industrialized world of the nineteenth century and Berger's Oregon to the late twentieth century in which the natural world has been despoiled to the extent that it has more or less ceased to exist in the lives of those who inhabit it. In both novels the charting of space and naming of species plays an important role, but the sense of time is very different, for Berger's novel expresses the idea that time is running out for the earth. We have had our last chance and no reconstruction will occur after the final catastrophe.

In the study of the representation of natural paradise it is useful to bear in mind Luc Ferry's affirmation that: "La nature est le fait des hommes et ...par conséquent, toute éthique normative est en quelque façon humaniste et anthropocentriste." [12] Ferry is refuting the notion of an "objective" representation of nature and pointing out the paradox in Aldo Leopold's exhortation to "think like a mountain." The representation of nature in the novels studied tells us not so much about the state of the natural world but says much about the human condition in a particular time and space.

As we saw in the previous chapter, in the work of Berger there is a logical transition from America as paradise to the paradise of the natural world, since it is the nature of America which Berger values, rather than its culture. He compensates for the loss of faith in the land of America by turning attention to its natural features. (*La pierre et le saguaro, L'attrapeur d'ombres*)

If, as Berger suggests, America can no longer function in the Western imagination as mythic space, we might ask ourselves the question: "Where to

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12 Ferry 244.

now?" It is not possible to go any farther West or to discover new space in an age in which we perceive all space to have been conquered and assimilated into the vast global economic network, leaving no "outside" to which escape might be possible. For Hythloday in Thomas More's *Utopia,* the island of Utopia was the next step in the exploration of the New World and thus an extension of that world. "Utopia was therefore no more than an extra voyage's distance away from the American lands already described with such excitement by every returning mariner."[13] For several centuries America held in the Western imagination the status of promised land, a place where utopia might be realized. Indeed several attempts were made to create real life utopias. At the dawn of a new century it is the opinion of many that not only has America failed in its promise, but also the very notion of utopia has become obsolete. An "utopie réalisée" to use Baudrillard's expression cannot exist, at least not in "real" space, but writers such as Baudrillard and Umberto Eco would seem to suggest that we live in a society of simulated utopias, of which Disneyland is the prime example. [14] This would imply that we have given up hope of striving by political means to create an ideal society (since we have come to the end of history, lost faith in the notion of progress and are condemned to live in an eternal present of rampant consumerism.) [15]

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to attempt some description of the characteristics of late twentieth century society, before

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13 Kumar, Krishan, *Utopianism* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Press, 1991) 49.

14 Umberto Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality* mentions this notion as does Baudrillard in *Amérique*. Krishan Kumar comments on these texts in *From Post-industrial to Post-modern society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

15 " A tormenting thought: as of a certain point, history was no longer real. Without noticing it, all mankind suddenly left reality'; everything happening since then was supposedly not true; but we supposedly didn't notice. Our task would now be to find that point, and as long as we didn't have it, we would be forced to abide in our present destruction." Elias Cannetti . Epigraph to the opening chapter of Baudrillard's *L'illusion de la fin* 11.

proceeding to a study of Berger's novel, in order to see how Berger's thinking coincides with the prevalent images and expressions of our age.

One image which comes to mind is that of the centrifugal society. Baudrillard has frequent recourse to this motif when describing America and also Western societies in general, "qui s'emploient à accélérer tous les corps, tous les messages, tous les processus dans tous les sens." [16] The result is a loss of reference points, a loss of the sense of history and continuity and above all a loss of meaning:

> Chaque fait, politique, historique, culturel, est doté d'une énergie cinétique qui l'arrache à son propre espace et le propulse dans un hyperespace où il perd tout son sens, puisqu'il n'en reviendra jamais. Inutile de recourir à la science-fiction: nous avons dès maintenant, ici et maintenant, avec notre informatique, nos circuits et nos réseaux, cet accélérateur de particules qui a définitivement brisé l'orbite référentielle des choses. [17]

Gérard Mermet also uses the image of the centrifuge in *Francosopie*, his account of contemporary French society, in the sense that the latter operates by excluding "ceux qui ne parviennent pas à se maintenir dans le courant."[18] Both these writers evoke a society which is without a sense of community, without centre. Paradoxically, in this globalized world much attention is given to individual performance which has the unfortunate effect of plunging individuals into a permanent state of restlessness and insecurity as they strive to achieve arbitrary "goals" or to "compete" as if we were all involved in some vast, complex and totally incomprehensible game, cast adrift into virtual reality, having lost sight of the very concept of "meaning"

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16 Ibid. 12.

17 Ibid.

18 Quoted in Baker, Bleuzé et al (eds), *Collage* Mc-Graw-Hill, 1996) 53.

or "reference." The stress on individual performance is perhaps the ultimate form of alienation born of capitalism, since, as Baudrillard affirms, it leads to "la réalisation inconditionnelle de l'être humain comme programme." [19]

As the twentieth century is drawing to a close and the traditional utopias or mythic spaces of western cultures are no longer viable, the quotation from Frye's "Varieties of Literary Utopias", which served as our starting point seems particularly apt. Frye stresses that, since utopia is always a reflection on the society to which it stands in opposition, modern utopias must "derive their form from a uniform pattern of civilization spread over the whole globe" and "be rooted in the body as well as in the mind, in the unconscious as well as in the conscious, the forests and deserts as well as in highways and buildings." (133-4) One such utopia, which can exist only globally, is that of the return to a harmony with nature, which in the later decades of the twentieth century has taken the form of environmentalism.

Various counter-cultural movements have arisen during the course of the last few decades in response to post-industrial capitalism. One such movement is the ecology movement which has manifested itself in various forms. In the 1960s this movement expressed itself in neo-romantic terms as a "search for authenticity" or a "return to nature/grass-roots" in response to a growing dissatisfaction with an increasingly technological society motivated by production and economic progress. Michel Tournier's *Vendredi* belongs to this era. We might say that Robinson on his island "drops out" of capitalist society, dispensing with all wordly goods and, by the end of the novel, achieving ultimate harmony with his environment through a process akin to human photosynthesis as he absorbs the sun's

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19 *L'illusion* 144.

energy.

The natural paradise created by Yves Berger in his novel *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* (1994) almost thirty years after Tournier's *Vendredi* is a very different place, indicative of the evolution of ecological thinking during the last three decades. Berger's novel moves between the world of dream or illusion and that of contemporary reality. The references to current events - the Swift-Tuttle comet, Tchechnya, the seal hunt, famine in Somalia - set the novel very definitely in the 1990s. Indeed news clippings are an essential component of the novel, but on the other hand the story moves into a different domain as we follow Oregon, the main character, and his horse Appaloosa, into a previously unknown land. This land is not shown on any maps or survey records. It is situated, as we are told in the opening lines of the novel, in the northern hemisphere, between the Arctic circle and the tropic of cancer at a latitude of 408 degrees 40′ and a longitude of 243 degrees 60′ - very precise but impossible coordinates. This juxtaposition of precision and impossibility is very much a feature of this novel. This is apparent in the descriptions of the many varieties of flora and fauna whose coexistence all in one place is a total impossibility, unless, of course, that space happens to be a simulated space such as biosphere 2 or a virtual space. Throughout the novel, the more precise the descriptions of flora and fauna, the more species Oregon (who sees himself as completing the work of Linnaeus) catalogues, the more unreal this country seems to be. The space which Oregon discovers is a blend of utopia and the lost paradise. It is a paradise in that the land he discovers is a place of great natural beauty and gentle climate which fosters and nurtures an abundance of life forms. Most importantly it is, Oregon feels, a place that has until this moment known no

human presence: "Ils étaient, la jument le premier équidé et lui le premier homme à marcher dans le Pays. Les premiers aussi à découvrir une mémoire animale où les hommes n'existaient pas." (35) This passage is reminiscent of the experience of Robinson Crusoe on his island: the animals look upon him without fear because they have never seen such a creature. This country apparently has no dangerous animals or threat of any kind and, most importantly for Oregon who is seeking an escape from the inevitability of death, time runs more slowly here than in the world beyond so there is always hope that it might stop altogether. All of these factors suggest a Garden of Eden, but on the other hand this is a place in which Oregon aims to construct a whole new society (a possible utopia), a place where the ills of both the old world and the new world can be rectified. This will be the 'Nouveau Nouveau monde' since the New World has failed to fulfil its utopian promise.

Although the Nouveau Nouveau monde may be utopian, it is not strictly correct to refer to it as utopian society, since Oregon is the sole human inhabitant (at least until the arrival of Faustine, an Eve figure who will bring about the downfall of Oregon and his land). It is perhaps the only utopia possible in the late twentieth century, a period characterized by the demise of political movements and their replacement by extreme individualism. We live in an age in which, as Krishan Kumar says, "psychology, or even psychoanalysis, not sociology, is the master passion."[20] Oregon's country is his own individual creation, an environmental paradise for endangered species.

Both this novel and *Le Monde après la pluie*,(1997) situate Yves Berger within the realm of environmental thinking. We might say that, for Berger,

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20 Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987) 421.

utopia has shifted from the North American continent (*Le Fou d'Amérique, Les matins du nouveau monde*) to the realm of nature. Before trying to situate this novel (*Immobile*) within any particular framework or mode of thought we need to consider the various manifestations and evolution of the ecology movement over the last few decades. In the 1960s it was perhaps still thought possible for humans to "return" to nature as it was thought possible for oppressed peoples to shake off the remnants of colonialism and achieve the state of "freedom and independence." These were the utopias of the time. In our age of cynicism, of performance and individualism such ideals no longer have currency. The ecology movement has evolved: one aspect of it is "deep ecology" which is in essence anti-humanist and promotes the idea of nature as a subject, having intrinsic value and legal rights. Taken to its logical conclusion deep ecology would condemn human beings as the ultimate evil and strive for their eradication from the planet. (Such thinking has provided a wealth of material for science fiction.)

The ecological thinking with which we live daily has little to do with deep ecology, but might rather be classified as "virtual ecology." This kind of ecology, because of the power of capitalism to recuperate and use for its own ends, every counter-cultural movement, allows us not only the privilege of consuming "green" products, but also that of witnessing (the not very inspiring spectacle) of government leaders from developed nations gathering to discuss and argue over the acceptable percentage of toxic emissions and greenhouse gasses which might be released into the atmosphere. This is the kind of behaviour which led David Suzuki to remark recently that: "Environmentally speaking, North America is in a car going 100 kilometres an hour heading straight for a brick wall, and everyone is arguing about

where they want to sit." [21] Baudrillard also expresses the idea that ecology has moved to the realm of the virtual : "Il n'y a rien contre cette règle implacable qui veut que le virtuel produise le réel comme déchet. Aucune écologie n'y peut rien, aucune écologie bénévole. Il faudrait une écologie maléfique." [22] Baudrillard suggests also that our constant talking about the necessity of preserving the natural world is on much the same level as that of human rights - we only seek to protect by law that which no longer exists. This is consistent with Fredric Jameson's affirmation that "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good."

In *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* Yves Berger expresses an ironic stance towards the discourse of virtual ecology, but at the same time a sincere love of the natural world. It is evident from the outset that Oregon will not attempt to live a "natural" existence in this new and wonderful world which he calls simply "le Pays". Unlike Tournier's Robinson whose contact with his environment is of a very material (physical)nature Oregon's relationship to his new found country operates far more on the level of language than of physical contact. There is no interraction with the land itself. Oregon is a creature of the late 20th century: he has acquired the right to this marvellous place through some bureaucratic wrangling. For a large sum of money, he has sold a piece of meteorite which he owned and this enables him to move to the Land and to pay a helicopter company to fly in all the supplies he needs for building, as well as huge quantities of paintings, books, newspapers and the mail. Oregon resembles Teddy of *Les grandes marées*. Both men, seeking a personal paradise, are nevertheless dependant on the outside world for

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21 *Equinox* 104 April/May 1999 5.
22 *L'illusion* 116.

their survival. In Oregon's case there is no mention of food or other basic necessities and certainly the notion of living an austere existence on the land is far from his mind, since he is, above all, a collector.

The main purpose of the Land is to provide a space of conservation for endangered species which he hopes to collect, and an opportunity for the regeneration of the world by applying to various geographical features of this New New World, the names of places where tragedies have occured in the old and new worlds. There is an obvious analogy here with the naming of American settlements by pioneers. He wishes to recreate here the world as it was in its pristine state, before the evils of pollution and the abominations of history:

> Il se disait qu'il allait, là, dans le Pays, prendre une revanche qui ne serait pas seulement la sienne, mais celle de la condition humaine tout entière, rachetée, recomposée .... revanche qui serait aussi, à égalité, celle de la planète, qu'il rendrait à son intégrité, dans le temps d'avant les fleuves souillés....revanche encore pour l'Histoire, déconsidérée, lourde en crimes et forfaits... revanche, enfin, pour le langage, dont il ne doutait pas qu'il allait, accordée aux choses, régner par la grâce de ses mots les plus beaux. (30)

In this desire to right all the wrongs of history, Oregon's New New World reminds us very much of the castles and museums of wealthy American collectors as described by Umberto Eco in 1975 in *Travels in hyperreality* : "The ideology proclaimed by Forest Lawn is the same as that of the Getty Museum .... It is the ideology of preservation, in the New World, of the treasures that the folly and negligence of the Old World are causing to disappear into the void." [23] Oregon has taken it upon himself to be

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[23] Eco 38.

responsible for the salvation of the whole planet by starting a whole new world, just as the narrator in *Le Fou d'Amérique* wished to alter the course of American history by means of narration. In the above quotation the reference to the reuniting of language and what it names is reminiscent of several passages in the novels of Le Clézio. Indeed Berger and Le Clézio have much in common from the perspective of ecology and language. Both authors express a belief in the power of language and a desire to attain unity of language and world, but also the impossibility of this desire. Only in language can a mythic space exist. This is suggested by the quotations which the author chooses as epigraphs for the novel.[24]

Initially Oregon seems to assume the role of Adam in the garden of Eden, being the sole custodian with the power to name all species. For an Adam of the 1990s naming consists of checking in various nature guides, identifying plants and animals and recording their presence. In fact Oregon sees himself not really as Adam, but rather as Linnaeus, his task being one of classification. He spends long periods of time cataloguing the contents of the Land and deciding which endangered species might be added to those which exist there already.

The principal aim of this collection is the overcoming of time and death, the main reason for the existence of mythic space in the human imagination. The discovery of the Land stems from Oregon's sudden consciousness of his own inevitable death: "Oregon reçut la révélation de sa mort le jour de ses trente ans." (75) Stricken by this idea and totally unable to

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24 "Comme si le langage nous venait d'un pays magique où la chose, la pensée, le mot ne fissent qu'un."
(Jean Paulhan, *Lettres à Ungaretti*.)
"Il était un fils de roi qui avait beaucoup de livres... Il pouvait s'informer de tout peuple et de tout pays, mais où se trouvait le jardin du paradis, il n'y avait pas un mot là-dessus." (Andersen. *Contes merveilleuses et fantastiques*.)

deal with the absurdity of the human condition, he takes to his bed and lapses into a drug-induced torpor. A turning point occurs in his life thanks to a particularly powerful hallucination which leads to the creation of "l'Oregon du dedans", the interior interlocutor whom we have already encountered in *Les matins du nouveau monde*. It is this second Oregon who gives back life to the first:

> Une fois - le tournant de sa vie de malade - ses hallucinations l'arrachèrent à lui, le placèrent hors de lui, à côté de lui, et si fort et si ressemblant son double qu'il le crut lui et se vit, lui, l'autre, la silhouette qui s'en allait emportant sa mort, dont elle le délivrait. (80)

Oregon believes that this double, having thrown away his death, "comme on vide le seau d'un malade" (81), reintegrated his being and will henceforth form a part of his person.

Since Oregon has vanquished his own personal death, he hopes to accomplish that same feat on behalf of the planet. Not only does he wish to make the Land an ecological paradise, by collecting endangered species from around the world, but he also devotes much of his time to studying the origins of the universe in order to determine the exact point at which the degeneration set in. There is an obvious analogy here with the retelling of American history in the earlier novels, the same illusion that if only the crucial moment can be discovered, then the mistakes can be rectified and paradise regained. In Berger's novels the recounting of a narrative, whether it be that of America or the planet, leads to the possibility of reconstruction:

> Oregon êut-il eu le pouvoir de recommencer le monde (mais où dans le temps et dans l'espace?), il refaisait le socle, déplissait les roches, changeait de sediments de couverture, indurait les nouveaux. Alors un autre univers qui sur des bases solides, assurait l'éternité à tout et, peut-être, à tous. (165)

Unlike Verne's colonists in their island paradise, Oregon's presence, for most of the novel, has no effect whatsoever on the Land itself, for he is living a virtual existence, interacting only with language, believing, for instance, that it is possible to save a region ravaged by war or natural disaster, simply by giving the name of the affected region to an area of his Land. Berger's ironical stance to the whole question of conservation is shown in his description of Oregon's dilemma as he debates the possibility of rescuing endangered specimens of the human race, deciding finally that the enterprise is too risky since it would inevitably lead to overpopulation. "Oregon venait de fermer le Pays à l'immigration." (194)

Oregon's faith in the power of language to transform the world will prove to be unsustainable. The identification of Oregon with the Paiut prophet, Wovoka, suggests both an admiration for such faith in the power of words and the wistful knowledge that the words are indeed powerless to stop events. In 1890 Wovoka, flying in the face of all evidence, predicted the defeat of the white man, the return of the bison, the renewal of the prairie and the resurrection of the Amerindian peoples. "Wovoka, c'était lui Oregon dans un autre siècle et dans l'accablement d'une sale Histoire." (169) Oregon feels he has a greater chance of success than Wovoka, because of the Land and its wonderful power of regeneration. Unfortunately for Oregon, his dream will prove to be just as elusive as that of his predecessor and in the end, his country, like Wovoka's America, will be unable to withstand the intrusion of the outside world:

> Dans le plein jour à présent, il les vit. Mille fois plus nombreux que la veille au soir, ils montaient vers le Pays, dans le Pays, toute une armée, toute une humanité qu'il savait d'asociaux, de marginaux, de déclassés.... tous les malheureux du monde enfantés par l'Ancien

> Monde et qui, un siècle après qu'ils avaient déferlé sur le Nouveau, submergaient, par d'autres pistes de Santa Fe et de l'Oregon, le Nouveau Nouveau. (219)

Oregon's wonderful mythic space can only be sustained in words. By naming areas of his land "Washita" or "Tchechnya" he hoped to redress the wrongs suffered in these places in the past, but his country is an illusion which crumbles under the weight of real human beings seeking refuge. Oregon's failure expresses a scepticism towards movements such as environmentalism which seek to restore the world to its pristine state (which most probably never existed) and also a sadness at the collapse of yet another potential paradise.

Although *Immobile* is similar in many ways to the earlier novels of the American trilogy, expressing the same preoccupation with time and history, it ends on a much more pessimistic tone: Oregon, aware that his Land is now lost to him, shoots his beloved Appaloosa to save her from the dreariness of the outside world and it is suggested that he himself will soon follow her. (219- 220) Whereas each of the earlier novels, in spite of the failure of the promised land, ended on a soaring note of optimism (the image of America with its power to provide an interior world capable of overcoming time and death) *Immobile* seems to fade away at the end. Oregon is left to "sa vie, sa mort, ses rêves". (220) This same pessimism is expressed in Berger's later novel *Le monde après la pluie.*

Le monde après la pluie.

The novel opens on an apocalyptic scene of total environmental catastrophe. There are no details of when disaster struck or what exactly happened. Space and time have been obliterated. All landmarks, all points of

reference have disappeared. The world is covered in grey mud and bathed in a half light. The sun remains in the same place in the sky. The loss of temporal and spatial points of reference has a drastic effect on language. Meaning has also been obliterated from the world. Arcadi, the main character of the novel says "Je n'ai pas le langage pour dire ce que, avant la catastrophe, j'aurais tenu pour inimaginable...les mots me manquent et la syntaxe." (49) He is reduced to repeating the phrases: "pas possible" and "il s'est passé quelque chose." We are never to find out exactly what happened, but there is much discussion in the course of the novel as to why this thing happened: the earth had simply taken enough abuse from humans and decided to react.

Only eight people remain in this total wasteland. First Arcadi is alone in this grey world. Then comes Aube, sole survivor of her family. These names evidently suggest a return to paradise or at least a new beginning, but, like the representations of potential paradise in Berger's other novels, this one also will fail. The two most intriguing characters in the novel are the Crow Indian, Mocassin (originally named Two Moons) and a man who resembles Louis Armstrong so closely that he seems to be a clone. Am on my way, as Arcadi decides to call him, plays an imaginary trumpet and mops his brow with an imaginary handkerchief. (53) In typical Yves Berger fashion we have minutely detailed, precise description of these characters whose existence is totally absurd. They can be seen as simulacra, for both are accurate representations of people who no longer exist, that is, the dead trumpet player and the authentic Amerindian. Although Mocassin, as we find out in the course of the novel, is a genuine Crow Indian, his authenticity has been buried beneath layers of simulation. At the time of the catastrophe he was performing with the New Wild West Show dressed in full ceremonial gear,

complete with scalps and diverse trophies. Mocassin arrives like an apparition from Arcadi's childhood:

> Arcadi se connaissait depuis toujours les Indiens en lui, depuis une enfance qui les avait nourris de ses rêves et à ses rêves d'enfant ils avaient survécu, puissants, immortels, fortifiés par les livres, les échanges." (66)

Four other characters join the band of survivors: "les rasés", two belligerent and physically repulsive young men, and Anne and Michel, a brother and his blind sister.

In this total wasteland some unifying force is required to keep this eclectic group of survivors alive. That force will be Arcadi's conviction that their salvation lies in the West. Earlier in the novel Arcadi and Aube have witnessed the fleeing of all species of animals heading in one particular direction. This direction Arcadi assumes to be the West. (26)

The whole journey West has the quality of an hallucination. We are frequently reminded of the loss of reference points and when Arcadi and Mocassin seek for references in their past lives, the images which surface in their minds are all from books or film, never from lived experience. Consequently their actions and speech are determined by what was said and done in *Dances with Wolves* or *Jeremiah Johnson*. Extracts from Christopher Columbus' log come to Arcadi's mind when he needs to bolster his own confidence and that of his companions. Mocassin often strives to resemble an Indian from a Fenimore Cooper novel. Thus text and film provide reference and language in this empty world. And when Mocassin has a dream vision which will guide and save the starving group, it is a vision postmodern style which leads the starving group to a canyon, at the bottom of which are

American trucks full of canned food, "les camions de la libération et du rêve américain." (139) Arcadi feels that these could have been parachuted from his childhood. (141) [25] Canned goods do seem, after all, an appropriate food source (or manna from heaven) in a world where nature has been totally destroyed.

When finally signs of life begin to show - first blades of grass, then a variety of flora and fauna including passenger pigeons - Arcadi is convinced they are going back in time to the Neolithic Age, the time when all started to go wrong. (198) As in *Le fou d'Amérique* and *Immobile* the salvation of the world depends on finding the moment when evil began. Arcadi is sure that the earth can be saved if only Neolithic people can be warned of the dangers of civilization: "Nous allons infléchir son cours [le Néolithique], empêcher l'extinction des espèces et la fin du monde." (216)

Naturally such a quest is bound to fail. The survivors are lost on the journey. Anne, Michel, les rasés and Am On my Way simply disappear during the night. Aube dies of a plague-like illness and Mocassin (whom Arcadi had wanted to reinstate in his natural habitat - the neolithic) dies of the wound he had sustained at the time of the catastrophe. His remains are dealt with as prescribed in the film Jeremiah Johnson. (232)

Only Arcadi remains and when he does fulfil his dream of finding the Neolithic people they shoot him with an arrow before he has a chance to speak. There is, near the end of the novel, an attempted conversation between the dying Arcadi and his killer, which expresses both the possibility to save the world inherent in language and its failure to do so:

> Comme s'ils se comprenaient , le vivant et le mort
> également passionnés, comme s'ils attendaient que

[25] Berger frequently integrates into his novels autobiographical details, many of which, as is the case of the American trucks, have the quality of a hallucination.

> les mots se rencontrent et à la façon des silex qu'on
> frotte, fassent jaillir la lumière , mais il est trop tôt
> ou trop tard pour que l'événement se produise. (247-8)

The image which closes the novel is of a story told to Arcadi by Mocassin, that of souls rising to heaven dispersed by the wind:

> Two Moons lui avait raconté, une fois, à propos
> des âmes qu'il pensait avoir vues monter dans
> le ciel bleu, là-bas, loin là-bas, si loin, loin pour
> toujours du côté de Shoshone, dans le Wyoming,
> et qu'un coup de vent avait dispersées. (248)

This final image can be seen as a summary of the plot of the novel. The survivors making their way towards paradise are, like the souls, quietly dispersed. This image also encapsulates the author's vision in the novels we have studied here, all of which represent the quest for an elusive paradise. The natural paradises portrayed in *Immobile* and *Le monde après la pluie* are unattainable in any real sense. Oregon's ecological reserve and Arcadi's Neolithic age are sustained by the vision of the two characters. When "reality" intrudes upon the vision in the form of mass immigration as in *Immobile,* or an hostile arrow as in *Le monde,* the illusion is shattered and the fragments dispersed. The paradises portrayed by Berger are personal spaces, which, unlike the utopia of *L'île mystérieuse,* cannot be reconstructed. The deaths of Oregon and Arcadi bring the vision to an end.

Conclusion.

What emerges from the study of the novels we have considered in the preceding chapters is a sense that myth continues to play an important role in Western culture, however technologically advanced a society may be. There are places in the Western world such as the island, the desert, Jerusalem and America which are real and mythical at the same time, that is to say their cultural or spiritual significance transcends their historical, geographical or political reality. The continued representation of a physical place in art, literature or popular culture transforms it into a space of the imagination endowed with mythical qualities, so that the very name of the place, "Jerusalem" or "America" for instance, has the power to evoke an image which may be far removed from the complex reality of the place itself. Similarly, through centuries of representation, the human imagination has endowed the natural world with mythic qualities, transforming the unknowable entities amongst which we live into spaces which speak to the human mind. It is this mythical aspect which is foregrounded in the spatial representations in the works we have considered in this study.

The novels of both the late nineteenth and late twentieth century which we have examined portray characters who are "myth-seekers" searching for, or dwelling in, a place which lies beyond the boundaries of everyday experience and which often functions in opposition to the social space within which the characters normally live. Although mythic space is, by definition, a timeless domain, where people are freed from the historical, political and social constraints of lived experience, the representation of such spaces cannot free itself from the historical and cultural background to which the novels belong. In the novels of both the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries the representation of any particular mythic space shows evidence of the influence of the social and political preoccupations of the era in which the novel was written.

In the nineteenth-century works of Verne and Loti, the representation of mythic space takes the form of an exotic "elsewhere," a space far from European civilization. Verne's novels are situated in areas outside the known world, as in *L'île mystérieuse,* or in America, which for Verne lay at the boundary between the known and unknown. These spaces provide the terrain for amazing adventures and also ground for the exploration of science's wondrous possibilities. As we have seen, however, in Verne's later novels, the author evokes the dystopian possibilites inherent in scientific achievement. The doubts and fears of fin de siècle sensibility influence spatial representation in the later novels. In *L'île à hélice, Les cinq cents millions de la Bégum* and *Le Testament d'un excentrique* Verne expresses the notion that scientific progress may have created a world which threatens to engulf its human inhabitants in a system they cannot control, a world which tends, instead, to control them. No space, however far removed from European civilization it may be, can escape modernity, for all the marvellous places portrayed are drawn into the financial web of capitalism. The world of natural wonders and infinite possibilities portrayed in *L'île mystérieuse* gives way to a world in which money is the prime force.

Similarly Loti's travelogues are an account of his attempt to find and represent a space beyond the confines of European industrialized society. His spiritual quest for Jerusalem is just as much a search for an exotic "elsewhere" as are the erotic adventures of his earlier novels. His quest for a spiritual alternative to modern life proves to be fruitless for he finds only images of

death and decay in the desert, and the reality of Jerusalem in no way corresponds to his mental image of the Holy City. In the modern world of the late nineteenth century, even Jerusalem is accessible to the vulgar masses, for the expanding network of transportation systems has brought much of the world within reach. The mythic appeal of these spaces is lost when they can no longer be considered as standing apart from the rest of the world. *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* express Loti's nostalgia for a world which the forces of modernity have banished forever.

The spatial representations in the novels of Verne and Loti bear out Kern's affirmation that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the Western perception of the world was one of shrinking space and that Imperialism and modernity had made the world a more homogeneous place. The scientific discoveries and advances of the nineteenth century had given greater momentum to the forces of secularization. The works of Verne and Loti, in different ways, express the sense of the resulting disenchantment of the world. The later works of Verne show a sceptical attitude towards scientifically created utopias, and offer the vision of a world in which there is little left to discover. Loti's writing is infused with a sense of emptiness, since the world he describes has been reduced to pure form. The spiritual meaning which he seeks has been evacuated from it. Thus the works of both these authors can be seen as an expression of that fin de siècle pessimism which felt the world was falling into decay and that time and space were near exhaustion.

Such disenchantment is perhaps the result of the narrative perspective in the writing of Loti and Verne. The narrative voice of *Le Désert* and *Jérusalem* is that of an observer seeking a mythic space which is

geographically locatable, a space which lies outside the area of Western civilization. Such a quest is doomed to failure in the modern, colonized world where Western civilization has hegemony. In the later novels of Verne which we have examined the narrative voice is, in essence, that of a French observer looking at America, an America which was once believed to have mythic potential, but has failed to live up to its promise. In *L'île à hélice* the floating island is portrayed through the eyes of the four French musicians, who are unwilling passengers on the vessel. Their sceptical gaze reveals the faults inherent in this technological utopia. The main perspective in *Les cinq cents millions de la Bégum* is that of Marcel, the young, intelligent Alsatian who infiltrates Stahlstadt in order to reveal the evils of this advanced technological society. The narrator of *Le testament d'un excentrique* is situated as an observer of the boardgame which covers the space of the United States. In all of these novels by Verne the narrator is in a superior position, observing the happenings in a world which seems at first a place of wonder, but then falls prey to human failing.

In the novels of the late twentieth century which we have examined, the mythic space loses its geographical definition and becomes much more a space of the mind. In these novels there is no quest for a place which lies outside the boundaries of Western civilization, for the characters accept (explicitly or implicitly) the fact of globalization and realize that Western civilization is inescapable. There are, however, many similarities between the novels of the two eras.

The spatial representation in the novels of Le Clézio, Poulin, Berger and Tournier suggests that the postmodern era shares many of the preoccupations of the late nineteenth century including a similar sense of fin

de siècle malaise. The sense of shrinking space and the degeneration of the earth is even more acute in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth. This gives rise to a nostalgia for a more "natural" way of life which might counteract the increasingly urbanized existence led by the majority of Western populations. In the novels we have examined, however, there is recognition of the fact that any return to nature or to an idyllic past is an impossibility since the postmodern, technological world has exerted its influence over all available space. Thus the myth-seekers in the novels of the late twentieth century direct their quest away from the exterior world towards the space of the imagination.

Myth in our own era has become personalized. It is the affair of the individual rather than the collectivity. Utopia no longer seems to be a valid concept. The writers we have studied do not attempt to locate the exotic "elsewhere" in the real space of the globe, but rather portray mythic space as belonging in the realm of the imagination, which has the power to transform the world of everyday experience. Mythic space is created out of language in order to re-enchant the world and indeed the desire for a mythic space can be equated with the desire to give new life to language, which is seen to have been degraded. In the novels of Berger, Le Clézio and Poulin the quest for a mythic space amounts to a search for meaning and authenticity in a world which is perceived as being artificial and empty of meaning. This same sense of emptiness and futile activity haunts Baudrillard's description of America. Just as Loti sought for spiritual meaning in his quest for Jerusalem, the characters in the novels of Poulin, Berger and Le Clézio are seeking out mythic space in the hope of bringing meaning to their existence as individuals.

The desire for the mythic elsewhere in the late twentieth-century novels we have examined suggests a discontent with the world of lived experience. Most of the characters in these novels are ill at ease in their environment. The novels, as well as Baudrillard's essay on America, are in large part a critique of that environment. Tournier's Robinson finds joy in existence only after the total destruction of the capitalist economy he had put in place on the island. Poulin's *Les Grandes Marées* can best be read as a critique of consumer society of the 1970s. Le Clézio in *Désert* and *Jérusalem* expresses also the notion that the modern, industrialized world is an evil place in which humans are forced to live as exiles. All of Berger's novels express nostalgia for a lost ideal world, modelled on pre-Columbian America, which has been irrevocably destroyed by our advanced civilization. Underlying Baudrillard's sometimes playful description of hyperreal America is the critique of a utopic society which rejects the poor, a society in which lonely individuals circulate in perpetual motion.

It is possible to read into these novels a totally pessimistic attitude towards the world. Not only is there a strong critique of Western capitalist society in all of them, but also most of the mythic spaces constructed in opposition to that society appear to be unsustainable if we consider the endings of the novels which express either ambiguity or a sense of failure. Berger's natural paradises fade out of existence at the end of *Immobile* and *Le monde après la pluie*. Similarly Le Clézio's *Désert* ends with the gradual disappearance of the evanescent nomad figures. Of all the twentieth-century novels we have examined, only in Tournier's *Vendredi* is the mythic space sustainable. This is achieved by Robinson's total refusal to live in the time and space of his own century. He accedes to a mythic existence by a process of

dehumanization. Compromise with the world of his contemporaries would lead to destruction of the island space.

If, however, these authors seem to be rejecting the social space which they inhabit in search of an elusive mythic "elsewhere", it is not merely out of a sense of Romantic nostalgia for some ideal past, for these authors (with the exception of Tournier) all recognize and accept the inevitability of the modern (or postmodern) world. We might see all these authors as being, in fact, eminently postmodern in that they construct mythic spaces from the very fabric of contemporary society. Berger's America is carefully constructed from textual fragments. The notion of resemblance to the "real thing" is irrelevant in the mind of the narrator, since the importance of this mythic America lies in its power over the imagination. Similarly the natural paradises of *Immobile dans le courant du fleuve* and *Le monde après la pluie* are not imitations of the garden of Eden, but collages made from text and film. They are creations of the individual mind. It is strongly suggested in *Immobile* that Oregon's ecological paradise is an hallucination. The neolithic world to which the band of survivors is heading in *Le monde après la pluie* is a creation of the imagination. It is represented more as a vision than a real place and it is clear in the text that this vision is formed from fragments of reading and film which Arcadi remembers from the time before the great disaster. In Poulin's *Volkswagen Blues* the myth of America is also built from fragments. Extracts from books, tourist sites and museum reconstructions contribute to the formation of this myth. Similarly in *Les Grandes Marées* Teddy's island existence is filled with the objects of consumer society and is in fact inextricably linked to that society being owned and controlled by "le patron."

Although Le Clézio does not use the material of the postmodern world in the same way as Poulin or Berger, his work resembles theirs in that the mythic spaces he creates have importance in the novels as individual visions rather than geographical spaces. The desert and Jerusalem are represented, not as spatial entities, but rather as shimmering visions which appear to Lalla and Esther in fragmented form. These fragments of history, that of the desert nomads or of the Jewish people, have the power to enrich the lives of those oppressed by the modern world.

Even if the mythic spaces represented in these twentieth-century novels prove to be fleeting and unsustainable in the face of contemporary society, their existence is nevertheless testimony to the power of the imagination and of language. In all these novels the representation of mythic space is an attempt to re-enchant the world through the use of language. Le Clézio's poetic imagery, Berger's lyrical prose, Poulin's delicately understated musings and Tournier's powerful writing express the notion that mythic space continues to exist in language. Even if our materialistic, technological society has succeeded in destroying our sense of wonder at the physical world, language still has the power to evoke in the human imagination a sense of mythic space.

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